

The story of

# WOMEN IN MINISTRY

in the Baptist Union of Great Britain

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# Women in Ministry

A reader exploring the story of women in leadership and ministry  
within the Baptist Union of Great Britain

**A READER EXPLORING THE STORY OF WOMEN  
IN LEADERSHIP AND MINISTRY WITHIN THE  
BAPTIST UNION OF GREAT BRITAIN**



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# 1 SETTING THE SCENE

## **Surely the issue of women in leadership in Baptist churches is settled, isn't it?**

After all, women have been serving as pastors of Baptist churches since the 1920s, and continue to do so today. And there exists a seemingly 'thoroughly Baptist compromise' which allows those congregations who choose not to call a woman on theological grounds to continue as members of the Union, exercising the freedom enshrined in the Declaration of Principle that 'each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His laws.' We have had female Presidents of the Union, a female General Secretary, a female Deputy General Secretary, and female Regional Ministers, including a former Team Leader of the London Association.<sup>1</sup>

**'That women are not yet permitted to take their proper share in the life and work of the church is, to our thinking, a relic of barbarism'**

*The Baptist Times*, 1901 (Quoted in Smith, 2005: 29)

So, what's the problem?

In spite of these positive examples of women achieving a number of 'high-profile' roles within the denomination, the statistic remains that as of October 2008 only 11.6% of currently serving Baptist ministers are women.<sup>2</sup> This figure speaks of a far deeper issue, one which goes beyond ordained ministry, of the roles which women and men are required to play within Baptist congregational life.

Paul declared in Galatians 3:28 that 'there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus,' and the Baptists declared in 1926 that 'In Baptist belief and practice sex is not a bar to any kind of Christian service' (*The Baptist Times*, 1926). And yet these visions for radical equality between the sexes remain a long way from reality in many of the churches of the Baptist Union.

The problem before us is both systemic and institutional. From the way in which our history is communicated, to the ways of relating and patterns of behaviour which shape our common life together in the present, male patterns of power and

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<sup>1</sup> The first female president of the Baptist Union was Mrs Nell Alexander of Cambridge in 1978-9, and the first woman minister to hold presidential office was the Revd Margaret Jarman 1987-8. The Revd Dr Pat Took became the first woman Area Superintendent in 1998, and the Revd Myra Blyth became Deputy General Secretary in 1999. The Revd Lynn Green became General Secretary in 2013.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that the 2008 statistics also report that 6% of retired ministers and 25% of ministerial students were women.

authority remain normative. Even the 'debating chamber' forum of Baptist Union Council is one which inherently fosters competitive masculine discourse. However, the issue runs far deeper than this, permeating all levels of our church structures from the national to the local. The problem this creates for us is that those who relate differently, those who have alternative patterns of discourse, those who seek collaborative rather than competitive uses of power, are institutionally excluded and their voices remain unheard.

The purpose of this reader is to explore some of the ways in which Baptists have addressed the issue of women in leadership, with a view to informing the continuing debate on this difficult and potentially divisive subject. With this in mind, the voices of those surveyed, female and male, are given substantial space to speak for themselves. It is worth noting that despite the Baptist denominational devotion to scripture, much of the early movement in the matter of women in ministry was pragmatically motivated rather than theologically driven. However, within the freedom of conscience permitted by the Union's Declaration of Principle, there remain biblical and theological issues to be explored. The engagement of Baptists with these issues will be explored in detail in Section 7 of this reader. But first we need to understand the context of the journey so far, and so we will begin with an exploration of the events surrounding the initial decision to admit women to Baptist Ministry.

The premise of and motivation for this reader is that this issue is a gospel issue first and foremost, and that when gender inequality takes root amongst the people of God, all of God's people are diminished and the good news of Jesus Christ, in whom there is no longer male and female, is distorted.

# 2

## DEBATE OVER FINANCIAL ISSUES AND ACCREDITATION

‘In Christ Jesus there is and can be no distinction. The whole place of woman in our western civilization is due to the nobler conceptions which the Gospel has brought in its train. The question now, however, has been taken out of the merely speculative and academic. With an amazing swiftness, the position has changed. Political power has been given to six million women voters. Many doors which are at present closed against women will certainly be thrown open. I regard the liberation of woman from the bonds of prejudice, the growth of the power to serve at the call of new responsibilities, and the gift of her intellect, intuition and moral earnestness as the most helpful features of our time. Only at its peril can the Church make itself the last ditch of prejudice in this respect or forget that its problems will be best served by men and women working together... Does anyone think that women... can be permanently excluded from the highest service in the Church? The danger is lest they should lose patience with the Church as an institution and live their lives elsewhere.’

John Howard Shakespeare, 1918 (Quoted in Smith, 2006a: 41-2).

*Shakespeare was General Secretary of BUGB 1898-1925.*

The 1926 story begins a year earlier in 1925, at 2pm on Monday 14 September, at the meeting of the Special Committee re: Admission of Women to the Baptist Ministry. This meeting opened with an extract from the Baptist Union Council meeting of 18 November 1924:

In view of the financial and other questions involved in the admission of women to the accredited list of the Baptist ministry, it was agreed to appoint a small Committee to examine the whole subject and report to Council. (Baptist Union Council minutes, 1924)

The (brief) minutes of the ensuing discussion of the Special Committee are worth repeating in full (Special Committee minutes, 1926):

(a) It was reported that, so far, three women had been received by the Baptist Union as accredited ministers, namely:-



Ministerial List – Mrs. M. Living-Taylor, B.A.,  
Sion Jubilee Baptist Church, Bradford  
Probationers' List – Miss Edith Gates,  
Little Tew & Cleveley  
Miss Violet Hedger, B.D.,  
(without a settlement)

(b) Miss Gates was in receipt of a grant from the Sustentation Fund to the extent of £33 per annum.

(c) Conference took place concerning the general question of the admission of Women to the Baptist ministry, and many views were expressed. It was generally felt that when the Sustentation Fund was launched, the Assembly did not contemplate women ministers and that the solicitor of the Union should be asked whether it was permissible, under the Trust Deed, to pay the grant to Miss Gates. If not, her case might be treated in a different way and a grant made from another Fund.

(d) Finally, it was resolved to request the Secretary to prepare a statement on the whole subject for submission to members of this Committee, before presentation to the full Committee and subsequently to the Council.

Two interesting points are worth drawing out from these Committee minutes.

The first is that by the time the Committee met, there were already three women on the probationers' list, with two of these already in pastoral charge of churches.

The second is that the debate, in so far as it is recorded, seems primarily concerned with issues regarding whether women in ministry could receive a stipend from the Sustentation Fund.

The Baptist Union Council meeting 9 and 10 February 1926 received the following report from the 'Committee re: Admission of Women to the Baptist Ministry'.

It appears that the names of certain women ministers have been placed upon the Accredited Lists of ministers as given in the Baptist Handbook without full discussion either in the Council or in the Assembly. The Committee holds that a novel departure, involving many and large questions, should be the subject of careful consideration by the Council, and steps taken to regularise the position and to determine upon what conditions, if any, women may be admitted to our lists and to any privileges and benefits, such as sustentation or superannuation, that may attach thereto. (Special Committee report to Baptist Union Council, 1926)

This statement is highly significant, because it implies a lack of public engagement with the very theological and biblical issues which continue to define the current debate.

There is an implied criticism in the Committee report of this lack of public debate, and a call for Council to 'regularise' the situation. Once again this 'regularisation' is couched in terms of privileges and benefits, rather than theological debate.

**Violet Hedger** trained at Regent's Park College, and was called to Littleover, Derby, in 1926. Her Obituary from the BUGB Directory 1992-3 states that:

'The church was at a low-ebb with no baptisms for 15 years. Her preaching was 'a challenge to the great adventure of the Christian life'. The church revived, youth work grew and baptisms were recorded. Three happy and fulfilling years ended in a breakdown. Her next pastorate was North Parade, Halifax 1934-37 then she moved to Zion, Chatham. It was a strenuous and dangerous time, ministering in the dockland area during the second world war. The church building was bombed and the manse hit three times. The last time in 1944, buried and unconscious for hours, she suffered injuries that left permanent disabilities.

'After years of rehabilitation she became secretary of the Brotherhood Movement and in 1952 minister of Chalk Farm. All that was left of their buildings were two small vestries and a pile of rubble. Four years of ministry, involving building a new church and hall ended in another breakdown. Crippled now, she was nevertheless an inveterate traveller, visiting America, China, Africa and the Middle East. Retiring to Worthing she became an active member of Christchurch Road and secretary of the Fraternal. A pioneer in women's ministry she battled against family opposition, prejudice, emotional breakdowns and physical disability to fulfil the ministry to which her Lord called her. An indomitable spirit she died on 12 March, 1992, remembered by all whose lives she touched.'

However, the Committee report then goes on to make the following statement of its own position:

The Committee is clear that it would be contrary to Baptist belief and practice to make sex a bar to any kind of Christian service. (Special Committee report, 1926)

This is a key assertion, and forms the basis on which many future decisions are taken. However, the basis on which this statement is made is interesting:

A Church is within its rights in calling a woman to the pastoral or any other office, and this carries with it the right to accept such a call. The principle of the admission of women to the Baptist ministry would, in the opinion of the Committee, be generally approved. The matter in question, however, is their admission to the Accredited list. (Special Committee report, 1926)

This distinction between a call to ministry and entry onto the Accredited list is crucial. The decision to call a woman to ministry rests with the local church, and

on the basis of Baptist congregational freedom the Committee are able to affirm that call. However, entry onto the Accredited list carries with it a further level of privilege, and it is on this matter which the Committee are seeking clarification from Baptist Union Council. They go on to explain:

The Accredited Lists are no more than an expedient, they are required for the proper working of the denominational machine. Omission from it does not involve a judgment on the validity of a particular ministry; it means no more than that it is not valid to qualify for the benefits to which the Lists admit. The question of the inclusion of women on the Lists is, therefore, solely one of expediency. (Special Committee report, 1926)

*'The Baptist Times reported in 1911 on Sister Lizzie Hodgson, a deaconess at West End Baptist Chapel, Hammersmith. The report described her as educated and cultured, a good preacher with a literary gift, and someone who was capable and organized. She was attracting 500 each week to her women's meeting. More remarkably, she was also preaching on Sunday nights in the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, which seated 1,400 people, and was filling it, with two-thirds of the audience present being men. The Hammersmith church's membership in that period was between 400 and 500, so clearly many from outside the church were attending. During the first ten weeks of these evangelistic services there had been 200 enquirers.'*

(Randall, 2005: 105)

The issue under debate is not, it seems, 'the ministry of women'. The Committee recognise that there are already women in ministry among the churches of the Union, and is not seeking to have this situation reversed. The issue for consideration at Baptist Union Council is whether women should be allowed the 'benefits' of being on the Accredited list. In other words, it is a question of money. This fiscal imperative is underlined later in the report:

The Committee considers that, in the raising of the Sustentation Fund, only a ministry of men was contemplated and that some of the provisions of the Trust, which refers specifically only to the cases of married men and unmarried men, prima facie rule women out of its benefits. It therefore recommends that the Honorary Solicitor to the Baptist Union be consulted as to the legality of payments from the Sustentation Fund to women pastors. (Special Committee report, 1926)

This point is straightforwardly answered with a reply from Mr Cecil B Rooke, the Union Solicitor, who states that:

I am of the opinion that if a woman's name is placed on one or other of the Ministerial Lists any payment to her from the Sustentation Fund is perfectly valid... if a woman's name is in fact on the current list she is clearly within

the benefit of the Sustentation Fund. (Baptist Union Council minutes, 1926)

However, there are further concerns raised by the Committee arising from this possibility:

In the event of the Council sanctioning the admission of women to the Accredited Lists, the committee is strongly of the opinion that it is impolitic to admit married women other than widows. Otherwise there would be nothing to prevent any minister's wife who is accepted by the Church as her husband's colleague, conforming to the regulations for Recognition and being passed on to the lists. In the event of her husband's death, and the Church no longer requiring her services, she would then seem to become a charge on the Sustentation Fund as an unsettled minister. (Special Committee report, 1926)

Clearly the assumption here is that where a married couple are both called to ministry, the primary call rests with the male partner, and the Sustentation Fund should not be left with supporting a recently widowed female Pastor. However, the Committee notes further potential for trouble:

Moreover, there would be no reason why the wife of a layman in secular employment might not similarly qualify, and situations might be created of very considerable embarrassment. (Special Committee report, 1926)

These concerns about what is 'politic' and 'embarrassing' lead the Committee to state:

In existing circumstances the Committee is not in a position to recommend the admission of women to the Accredited Lists. (Special Committee report, 1926)

In the light of this conclusion, the Committee placed before Baptist Union Council the following questions for debate (Special Committee report, 1926):

Having regard, however, to the agreed principle of the right of women to admission to the ministry, the Committee invites the Council to consider –

(i) Whether they are prepared to take such steps as shall give full effect to the principle by the formation of an Accredited List for women with its appropriate conditions and benefits; or

(ii) Whether, for the present, the discretionary powers, vested in the Council acting through the Ministerial Recognition and Home Work Fund Committees, shall suffice to deal with cases as they arise, with such names of women as may be approved to be entered on a separate list to be entitled "List of Women Pastors" and appearing in the Baptist Handbook.

Once again, the debate is not about whether women can or indeed should be Baptist ministers. The debate focuses around the purely practical issues of finance and institutional control. The response of Baptist Union Council to this report from the Special Committee is not recorded in detail, and one can only speculate as to

the conversation that lies behind the following minute:

Considerable difficulty was felt in respect to the peculiar relation of women to the Sustentation Fund and the Superannuation Fund. (Baptist Union Council minutes, 1926)

However, Council did eventually feel able to take a decision:

[A]fter a lengthy discussion it was resolved to adopt the suggestions ... of an accredited list of women pastors with its appropriate conditions and benefits. (Baptist Union Council minutes, 1926)

And there it is. That is the story of the historic decision of the Baptist Union regarding women in ministry. The theological and biblical issues are un-debated, and the 'lengthy discussion' focuses on issues of 'conditions and benefits'.

Perhaps predictably, Council's next move was to establish a Sub-Committee:

[T]o take into consideration the framing of rules under which help could be given under the two funds named to women whose names appear on the list of women pastors. (Baptist Union Council minutes, 1926)

This Sub-Committee met on 12 July 1926, and agreed the following (Sub-Committee report, 1926):

Supplemental rules in connection with Women Pastors and the Superannuation Fund

1. Any woman pastor whose name is on the Accredited list of women pastors and who otherwise fulfils the conditions of rules 13/17 shall be considered for membership providing she is a spinster or a widow.
2. The benefit payable in the case of a woman pastor shall be the sum of £60 per annum.
3. The age at which a woman pastor shall become entitled to claim the benefits of the fund pursuant to rule 36 shall be 60 years.
4. If a woman pastor shall marry during her membership of the fund but before she may have become entitled to the benefits of the fund she shall cease to be a member of the fund but shall be entitled to have refunded to her the amount of the contributions to the fund of 2½% of stipend paid by her or on her behalf..
5. If a woman pastor who has been a member of the fund and has lost her rights therein through marriage becomes a widow she shall be entitled to rejoin the fund provided she fulfils the conditions for original membership.
6. If a woman pastor marries after she becomes entitled to the benefits of the fund she shall remain unaffected but her husband if he survives her shall have no rights in the fund and if her husband be a member of the fund and she survives him she shall not be entitled to a widows pension under the fund as well as and in addition to her own pension.

Having thus addressed in detail the concerns of the Special Committee regarding the admission of married women, the Sub-Committee is able to make the following recommendation:

Any woman pastor whose name is on the List of Women Pastors who is unmarried or a widow shall be deemed to be an accredited minister of the Baptist denomination for the purposes of the Sustentation Fund and the benefits to which such a woman pastor shall be entitled shall be the same as those in the case of an unmarried man. (Special Committee, 1926)

Once again, the debate is entirely one of fiscal propriety, to do with 'benefits' paid by the Sustentation Fund, and whether these can be paid to women in positions of ministry.

There is a tremendous irony here, because the Sustentation Fund has its origins in the work of the Baptist Women's League, and in particular the efforts of Isabel James (d. 1957). She was a close friend of J H Shakespeare, and the BWL had its first meeting in her home.

The [Baptist Women's League] became the primary organization for fund raising within the denomination. Women, in fact, gave much support to the sustentation fund for ministers in 1911... Isabel James was a driving force. (Smith, 2005b: 178).

Karen Smith recounts the address which James gave to the Baptist World Alliance meeting in 1911:<sup>3</sup>

[Isabel] James turned her attention to what she described as the most important work of the [Baptist Women's] League, the Baptist Sustentation Fund. 'We have hundreds of village Baptist ministers at home, who, to put it bluntly, are underpaid', and as the first step, 'the denomination is going to raise a million and quarter dollars [sic].' James declared that the women were going to 'make history, we are going to raise as much of that great capital sum as whole-hearted zeal and faith and love can achieve.' There were those who claimed it was too big an undertaking for the BWL, but she averred: 'that is where they make a mistake. Some of the greatest things in history have been wrought by a woman's faith.' Isabel James' eloquent and persuasive address concluded by pointing to 'a very great advance' in the history of the BUGBI, when during the previous spring ten women had been co-opted to its Council. 'We feel,' she claimed, 'that our churches and every organisation in connection with them will be the better and greater for men and women working side by side, and we see the future opening with wide and gracious possibilities.' (Smith, 2006a: 35-6).

The Baptist Women's League, therefore, provided the momentum which led to the establishment of the Sustentation Fund, and it is the administration of this

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<sup>3</sup>Prior to her retirement, Karen Smith was a Tutor at South Wales Baptist College, Cardiff.

very fund which shapes the 1926 discussion regarding the admission of women to the accredited list of Baptist ministers.

It is notable that at no stage in the minutes from 1926 is there any record of consideration of biblical texts at either the Committee or Council stages; rather the Baptist conviction of congregational independence is claimed as sufficient to allow such issues to be decided at a congregational level. It is the conviction of this reader that such an approach has created an oppressive compromise which primarily benefits those who wish to deny the ministry of women, by allowing congregations to continue to adopt a position which is hostile to women in ministry should they so choose. The Union role has become *de facto* one of facilitating these congregational decisions, rather than providing a clear challenge to those who refuse to affirm the calling and gifting for leadership of the women in their midst.

# 3 THE UNION TAKES A STAND: THE 'WOMEN IN THE SERVICE OF THE DENOMINATION' REPORT OF 1967

Paul Goodliff draws attention to a significant report published by the Baptist Union in 1967.<sup>4</sup> He takes up the story:

A forgotten chapter in the history of the acceptance of women's ministry took place in 1965-7. It appears that there is a precedent to the process of affirming women's ministry, and that this took place 40 years ago.

The Baptist Union Council at its Meeting on 9-10 March, 1965, appointed a committee 'to look at the position of women in the service of the denomination, and to have particular regard to:

- (a) women now seeking entrance to pastoral ministry
- (b) the lack of recruits to the Deaconess Order
- (c) future training of women for service of various kinds
- (d) the relation thereto of our denominational colleges.'

The Report, in its final form published in September 1967, says: The Committee met on five occasions. The Statement was, it claims, 'presented to Council in November 1966, and revised by a small group.' The November 1966 Baptist Union Council minutes do not record this statement. In fact it was the March 1966 Council that considered the Report. The minutes (p.64) state:

With regard to the recommendations, it was resolved:

That the Council receives the Report with thanks to the sub-committee for their work. It endorses Recommendations (1)(a) and (4) and remits Recommendations (1)(b), (2) and (3) to the General Purposes Committee and to other committees for further consideration and appropriate action.

Crucially, Recommendation (1)(a) states

In the judgment of the committee the theological basis of our faith does not warrant distinction between the sexes in the ministry of the church. The committee therefore recommends that the Council re-affirms the denomination's acceptance of women ministers and that it appeal to the churches to ask themselves how far in their practical attitude they are being true to the faith they profess.

While Recommendation (4), also accepted, includes:

The Committee .... Appeals to the churches to encourage the service of women in every way, and commends this document to them for careful study.

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<sup>4</sup>Paul Goodliff was head of the Ministry Department of the Baptist Union of Great Britain (2004-14) and is now General Secretary of Churches Together in England.



The Baptist Union Council minute book includes minutes of the committee meeting on 6 September 1967:

The Document was examined by the committee and it was agreed to duplicate the document and submit it to GP&F, the Council in March 1966 having accepted it in broad outline, for permission to duplicate.

GP&F on the 10 October 1967 minutes XII states that the revised document was accepted.

What is not clear is what happens to this Report thereafter. With no further discussion at Baptist Union Council in 1967-68, it can only be surmised that the Report, and its recommendations, were not pursued with much vigour. What is undeniable, however, is that Council has in fact adopted a recommendation that approves the ministry of women, and it is not true to say that it all depends upon the rather grudging approval of the first women ministers in 1922.

The decision of the March 1966 Baptist Union Council was reported in *The Baptist Times* of 17 March 1966, but there is no evidence of immediate correspondence in the paper about the issue (in part, because the letters page was taken up with correspondence about homosexuality, in the light of the Government legislation at the time) nor in any edition of the paper that I can find in 1966-7. The letters pages of the BT were often consumed with debates about ecumenism, evangelism and sex, but not at all concerned to either promote the ministry of women, or to express contrary views. (Goodliff, 2009: 1-2)<sup>5</sup>

The authors of the 1967 BUGB report 'Women in the Service of the Denomination', chaired by Leonard Lane, offer a stern warning which echoes down the decades to the current debate on women in ministry. They suggest that:

'Baptists need to think carefully again about their doctrine of the ministry and meaning they ascribe to ordination, lest they be guilty of practical injustice as well as theological confusion ... Many believe the present objection to women ministers in Baptist circles is based on feeling rather than reason.' (p.13)

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<sup>5</sup>The 1967 report also offers some helpful consideration of the biblical interpretation issue. See below: Section 7, 'Engaging With Scripture'.

# 4

## BAPTIST DEACONESSES BECOME MINISTERS IN 1975

The next milestone in Baptist Union Council's consideration of the issue of women in Baptist ministry is to be found in the discussions of the ending of the Baptist deaconess movement.

Since 1890 women served Baptist churches as deaconesses, a role which initially involved social work and visitation. However, as the nature of the role developed over the decades, it became increasingly clear that many deaconesses were in effect functioning as pastors of churches.

Ivy M Crowe, Chairman [sic] of the Deaconess Committee, wrote the following in January 1975:

'The Deaconesses themselves have not regretted their calling nor regarded themselves as second-class ministers. Their desire remains, as previously, to make the best use of their gifts and opportunities, in the service of the denomination, for the Kingdom of God. Over recent years the lines of demarcation between women ministers and deaconesses have become blurred. In function, training, stipend and superannuation they are on an equal basis. Little more than the title differentiates them.

'It might appear on the surface that the decision to seek Ministerial recognition has been taken hurriedly. This is not so. It was by a prolonged and careful consideration of all the facts, and the assurance of the support of a number of the retired deaconesses that the request was made that all active deaconesses be transferred to the Ministerial list.'

Despite Margaret Jarman's suggestion of a compromise position comprising a clarified deaconess movement (Jarman, 1968), the Baptist Union Council of 1975 received a resolution from Ivy M Crowe, on behalf of the Deaconess Committee, that:

Believing that the function of the deaconess has, under God, become that of a minister ... it was unanimously agreed to request the ... transfer of the active deaconesses to the Ministerial List.

As with the initial debate regarding the admission of women to the Accredited List of ministers, Council once again found itself facing a situation where women were pastoring Baptist churches, and yet were unaccredited. So, once again, Council was playing 'catch-up' with the reality which existed amongst the churches.

'I am driven therefore, to conclude that the existence of an order of deaconesses has been, for us as a denomination, an escape route by which we have avoided facing the real issue of women in pastoral ministry, and we have been content, because of the shortage of male ministers, to let women do the work of the pastoral ministry and call them by another name.'

Gwyneth Hubble, *Fraternal* magazine, 1961 (Quoted in Gouldbourne, 1998: 28).

# 5 SYSTEMIC BARRIERS TO WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

In 1986 the Baptist Quarterly devoted an entire issue (Volume XXXI) to the issue of 'women's participation in the life of our Baptist churches'. This volume provides a valuable and fascinating insight into the situation at that time, although Karen Smith rightly points out the inherent problem of trying to construct a historical narrative of women in positions of leadership:

Since it has been customary for the religious activity of women to be perceived as belonging to the private sphere, it is not surprising that little information can be found in these official 'institutional' records. The problem, however, is not that the records were kept by a male member of the congregation, as is sometimes supposed, but that they were records which described life in the 'public' sphere. There are examples, of course, such as the few which Briggs pointed to in his article on 'She-preachers, Widows and Other Women', which seem to highlight the fact that women held leadership roles in the church. Instead of arguing that these prove that women held leadership roles in the public sphere (which again seems to be a way of looking at women only from the dominant-male, 'institutional perspective'), perhaps it would be possible to say that they are examples of instances when women managed to find ways to enter the public sphere without threatening the male hierarchy within the structures of Baptist life... [Women] continue to be largely excluded from the pages of our histories... It is no longer enough to say that the story of women in the denomination has been told by men about men... Historians must search for sources which will portray a wider picture of Baptist life, one including all Baptists, men, women, and children, as well as minority groups within Baptist life. (Smith, 1991: 83-4)

In the article 'She-Preachers, Widows and Other Women: The feminine dimension in Baptist life since 1600' John Briggs makes the following telling observations:

Although Women Pastors were redesignated Women Ministers in 1957, they were still listed separately in the *Baptist Union Handbook* until 1975. Attitudes were deeply imbedded. The *Women in the Service of the Denomination* Report of 1967 noted that more women felt called to full-time ministry: 'Our difficulty is not that we cannot accept them, but when they are trained and ready, there is grave difficulty in finding a sphere of service'. Double thinking on this issue has beset Baptists for at least two-thirds of a century, probably reinforced by 'Brethren' influence. It shows in the Free Indeed documentation, produced by the Mission Department in 1981 when the Baptist Union Council comprised 133 men and 18 women (12%): '*In theory*, we believe in women ministers, women deacons, and women taking their part in leadership according to their gifts. *In practice*, we deny that belief by widespread prejudice against women ministers and

leaders'. A retired General Superintendent confessed, 'There are churches who will commend young women from their membership for ministerial training but who will not consider a woman for their own ministry... The suffering we cause to those, called by God, who in their loneliness face this kind of rejection must cease'. A former BMS missionary, who became a deaconess and then secured full ministerial accreditation, spoke of the frustrations of her new position. 'It was then that I realised the freedom one had had working in one of the younger churches overseas. I found that I had been welcomed to preach in home churches as a missionary on furlough but some of those churches were not prepared to welcome me as a woman minister'. As a deaconess her services had been more acceptable than as a minister: it was that seeking for equality of title for undertaking the one task of ministry that the churches were so slow to accept. (Briggs, 1986: 347-8)

These comments highlight the way in which, during the 1980s, women struggled to find either pastoral placements within which to exercise the ministry to which they had been called and trained, or adequate representation within denominational life. It is worth noting that by 1995-96 the percentage of women on Baptist Union Council had increased to 42 out of 225 (19%), while in 2008 there were 57 women out of 199 members (29%).

'Most church members live out their religious life... within their local congregation. That little community is what matters the most. The broader Christian community beyond it usually matters much less. Convincing them that accepting female leadership will benefit the little community is probably one of the major keys to getting lay church members to accept women in pastoral ministry.'

**Edward Lehman** (Lehman 1986: 318)

Margaret Jarman's article on 'Attitudes to Women in Baptist Churches in the mid 1980s' adds further depth to this picture.<sup>6</sup> She observed that:

While the official position is that all offices are open to women, and that leadership by women is increasingly acceptable, it is still unusual. Women are less likely to be appointed than men since their gifts and style of leadership are to some extent different from those traditionally expected in such roles. (Jarman, 1986: 327).

In other words, women seeking to exercise ministry were experiencing the 'glass ceiling' so often used as a metaphor to depict the invisible barrier which women face when aspiring to positions of responsibility or leadership. It would be attractive to think that things have changed dramatically in the 23 years since

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<sup>6</sup>Margaret Jarman (1932-2018) was a Baptist Minister.

Briggs and Jarman wrote, but the evidence, both circumstantial and statistical, speaks otherwise. This raises the question of what forces might be at work, within the church and wider society, to create this glass ceiling?

‘Here we strike one of the big questions in discussing women in ministry: is there a difference between the ministry of women and the ministry of men? At this point, I must confess to profound feelings of ambiguity. Having had the experience of being assured that my ministry, though no less valuable than a man’s, is of a different order – which is to say, that it is not appropriate for me to preach – I am rather suspicious of the ‘different but equal’ description.’

**Ruth Gouldbourne** (Gouldbourne 1998: 31)

In her 1997-8 Whitley Lecture, Ruth Gouldbourne offers some observations about the creative force of context, noting that if our context expects men to behave in one way (rational and logical) and women in another (irrational and feelings-orientated), then this will create men and women according to these presuppositions.<sup>7</sup> She then suggests that it is in baptism that a radical equality between men and women comes into being, but notes that within our churches this equality rarely finds expression in terms of leadership, with the whole ‘women in ministry’ debate being defined by an assumption that it is ‘maleness’ which is normative for ministry. Thus, even if women enter ministry, it is often a ministry defined according to ‘male’ terms. This has the effect of diminishing the distinctive contributions which women bring to ministry when they are free to minister as *women*. She concludes:

[I]f we are going to live with, in and through the ministry of women – not as a problem, not as a concession and not expecting women to deny their context and pretend to be men – then we need to listen to the voices from the margins, accept the ministry offered from the outside, and discover God on the outside, the God who was crucified outside the city wall. (Gouldbourne, 1998: 44-5)

Gouldbourne’s conclusion chimes with Margaret Jarman’s observation that:

Some women ministerial students experience problems sorting out their self-image as a minister if the role for which they are being prepared assumes a male figure. In the early stages of their ministry many women find it difficult to be accepted for themselves: they feel the pressures of attitudes expecting them to conform to the male stereotype. (Jarman, 1986: 328)

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<sup>7</sup>Ruth Gouldbourne is the minister of Grove Lane Baptist Church, Cheadle Hulme, and a former Tutor at Bristol Baptist College.

A further manifestation of the systemic barriers which collude to exclude women from ministry within Baptist churches is to be found in a consideration of why it might be that Baptist ministry is frequently perceived as an unappealing role for women to aspire to. All too often, from Sunday services to church meetings, Baptist churches embody power in ways that many women find unattractive. Particularly in view here is the competitive nature of many ministers' meetings, which inculcate an obsession with church size and status, and perceived career paths to 'senior ministry'. Writing in 1999, Jenny Few observed that:<sup>8</sup>

The current debates about new association structures and especially regional and national leadership teams have shown that there are many Baptists who favour a resurgence of strong, identifiable leadership, and a move to more authoritarian structures, with 'Senior Regional Ministers' and a 'National Leadership Team'. Baptists who hold this view would ... not necessarily want to deny women a place in these new structures, but the unspoken expectation is that such leadership continues in the patriarchal, male tradition.' (Few, 1999: 33-4)

A further factor which would bear greater consideration is the implications for women ministers who have children, and whether patterns of ministry can emerge which do not deny the denomination the ministry of a woman who, for example, takes maternity leave and then wants to work part time for a number of years. Such issues have all too often served to exclude women from ministry, or at least to relegate their ministerial service to middle age and beyond.

'This was the way it was, century after century, and it was not questioned or challenged, other than by the occasional, exceptional individual woman. We have grown up expecting to hear a man's voice in the pulpit, see a man presiding at Communion, see men around the Council tables, making the decisions and being the channels of wisdom. We have come to expect a male way of doing things, and to fit into the structures. If we have wanted to become part of it, we have had to do it on their terms and in their way, accepting and taking on board the one-sided nature of it all.

We have been taught that maleness is the norm, and that woman is other, and different. (Ordained men are ministers, whereas ordained women are *women* ministers).'

**Jenny Few** (Few, 1999: 12)

In her analysis of the Baptist deaconess movement, Nicola Morris concluded that:

The integration of the deaconess movement into the ordained ministry in 1975, though a much welcomed move at the time, has removed the only all-female power-base in the Union... when women's movements, with the

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<sup>8</sup>Before her retirement, Jenny Few was minister of Robert Hall Memorial Baptist Church in Leicester.

best of intentions, are incorporated into essentially patriarchal structures, the involvement of women is depleted... basic power structures are unaffected by such acts of integration and in effect, though not necessarily in intention, those in authority silence minority voices, keeping them away from the decision making process. (Morris, 2002: 43)

Interestingly, this assimilation of a women's movement into a predominantly male institution finds an historical precursor in the Baptist Zenana Mission. Karen Smith explains:

The zenanas [in India] were high-caste Hindu dwellings from which all males outside the immediate family were excluded... in 1866, Marianne Lewis... described the conditions of 'imprisoned inmates and urged the women at home to form a society in connection with the Baptist Missionary Society to aid its operations amongst the female population of the east.' (Smith, 2006a: 31)

This plea led to the establishment of an all-female mission organisation, which garnered a strong financial support base among British women responding to horrific stories of female oppression overseas. The Zenana Mission expanded to encompass work among women in China, and sent many women overseas as medical practitioners and teachers. Smith observes that, 'women serving as missionaries and working for the freedom of women in other lands were slowly recognizing their own cultural captivity... While the women had gone to set others free, they had actually been emancipated themselves.' (Smith, 2006a: 35, 37)

'most Christian people are now prepared to acknowledge that there is a wide field for women as medical missionaries in foreign lands, especially in India, where many of our less fortunate sisters must suffer and even die for want of medical aid worthy the name unless they can be attended by a doctor of their own sex, but it is not yet so generally recognised that there is an opening for women in a similar capacity at home. There is an old objection, still so frequently raised against the study of medicine by women, that I cannot pass on without a word upon it – viz., that this study must destroy the finer qualities which constitute true womanliness.

**Ellen Farrer** addressing the Baptist Assembly in Manchester, 1891 (Smith, 2006a: 35)

The strong home-support which the Zenana Mission attracted was achieved through the fundraising efforts of many women who were either the wives or daughters of significant Baptist ministers of the time. However, the Mission was not to remain an independent women's organisation indefinitely. The story continues:

As the Baptist work developed at home and abroad, Baptist leaders eventually decided that financial support for the work of home societies



and separate women's organizations could not be sustained. A series of meetings were held, at which the leaders concluded that with the increasing pressure put on churches for funds for the minister's sustentation fund, the continuation of separate operations for the BZM and BMS was no longer viable. Given that the financial situation, particularly the addition of the sustentation fund, was mentioned as the primary reason for bringing the BZM under the auspices of BMS, it is important to note that the Baptist Women's Home Auxiliary had been formed in 1908. This auxiliary in 1910 was re-named the Baptist Women's League (BWL). Women in the BWL had provided much of the fund-raising assistance for the sustentation fund. Arguably, the leaders of the BMS may have felt that their support was threatened by two separate women's organizations, because both were extremely effective and efficient in their ability to raise money.

Many Baptists resisted the decision for Zenana to amalgamate with BMS. The women were obviously reluctant to give up their independence, but apparently, many of the women whose husbands were active in the BMS called for the transition of the BZM from an independent group to an auxiliary of the BMS. In 1914, with great reluctance on the part of the women, the BZM became the Women's Auxiliary of the BMS (incorporating the Baptist Zenana movement). Provision was made for women to serve on the general committee of the BMS, but obviously most leaders assumed that the main control of the mission organization would now rest with the male leadership. (Smith, 2006a: 38-9)

The assimilation of the Baptist Zenana Mission into the male-led BMS is analogous to the enrolment of the Baptist deaconesses on the Accredited List of the Baptist Union. In both cases, the independence of female ministry was compromised as power passed from women to men. It is also ironic that a key motive for discontinuing the all-female BZM came from financial pressures exerted by the need to establish the sustentation fund, which at that time was for the support of an all-male Baptist ministry. It is even more ironic that, as has already been noted, it was debates over the administration of the sustentation fund which framed the debate about women in Baptist ministry. It seems that at every turn in this story the efforts of women to exercise ministry and leadership, either at home or abroad, were determined and stifled by male control centred on issues of money and power.

# 6 THE IMPACT OF FEMINISM

One of the responses to the 'glass ceiling' has been a growing interest in feminist theology as a tool for analysing the continuing experience of many women that opportunities for ministry are limited. Shirley Dex noted in 1986 that:

It looks very much as if a wholly secular movement, originating in the USA in the 1960s has become so powerful in secular thinking that it is forcing all our institutions, the church included, to rethink their attitudes towards women, womanhood, manhood and sexuality. (Dex, 1986: 320).

'I have little regard for the arguments against the ordination of women, for they are not strong arguments in any rational or theological sense – and this is widely acknowledged. I am much more concerned about the hidden debate about group psychology in a male-dominated vocation (why do some clearly feel so threatened?), and about a woman's body (is she really 'unclean' and therefore unfit to preside at communion during menstruation and after childbirth? If so – what kind of creator do you believe in?).

**Carol McCarthy.** (McCarthy, 1986: 336)

Writers such as Elaine Storkey, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Catherine Clark Kroeger, Phyllis Trible, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Mary Daly (among many others) have provided a firm theoretical base for feminist theology and biblical engagement which has been highly influential amongst both evangelical and traditional Baptists. Shirley Dex again:

Storkey adopts evangelical hermeneutical techniques and then advocates that interpretations of the Scriptures should be done against the background of a broad canvas of Scripture's themes; namely, those of creation, fall and redemption ... Within this framework, Storkey shows that it is possible for the Christian woman to be free in Christ, free to be human, free to be loving, free to be different from or similar to men, but not free to be autonomous... (Dex, 1986: 323).

'The feminist movement has... had an impact on religion. It has long been recognized that religious institutions are among the slowest to change. Nevertheless, as new assumptions about appropriate roles of men and women have gained acceptance, some of these changes have spilled over into the churches.'

**Edward Lehman** (Lehman, 1986: 302).

Another aspect of the debate has been the way in which attention has been drawn to the use of exclusive terms within church language. Ruth Matthews notes that:<sup>9</sup>

Only a generation ago it was commonplace to use the word 'men' as an inclusive word, automatically meaning 'men and women'. It is rarely, however, used this way today outside the churches. Politicians no longer talk about men's votes if they are referring to both women and men. If we mention a Scotsman or an Englishman we mean just that, and we have to change the word if we mean a woman. But the churches have been slow to change. Sometimes too, when change has been asked for, it has not only been seen as unnecessary but has also been seen as a source of ridicule. (Matthews, 1986: 331).

Whether in extempore prayer, liturgy, Bible text, song and hymn lyrics or the divine name, Matthews draws attention to the way in which exclusive language is frequently used in ways that reinforce the exclusion of women from full participation in church life. She concludes:

Our relationships with each other and with God... need language in which to be expressed and it seems to me important that we take as much care as possible to use language in a way that will all the time continue to deepen our faith, enable us better to share it with others, and help us to build each other up in Christian partnership. (Matthews, 1986: 334).

Jenny Few addresses the use of female names for God, and caricatures an all too common reaction:

[N]ot content with asking the men to move over and end the comfortable dominance they have enjoyed, now these women want to change the way we look at God. Before we know it we'll have God as *She*, and *Our Mother*, and biblical Christianity will become glorified paganism. (Few, 1999: 29).

She then points to the problem with such names for God as *King*, *God*, *Almighty*, *Father* and *Protector*:

These metaphors, names, pronouns, and titles are exclusively male, and they describe a ruling, patriarchal, in-charge, military sort of God. God is in his heaven – seated on a throne as king, controlling his people with benign benevolence (Father) or thundering as an aggressive warrior, *Who is this king of Glory? The Lord God of hosts, the God of Battles! ... A male God, conceptualized as male through language, which in itself was mainly written and spoken by men.* (Few, 1999: 29).

Few notes that both traditional hymns and contemporary worship songs make liberal use of such male language, with the result that worshipping

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<sup>9</sup>Before her retirement, Ruth Matthews was a Baptist Minister at Walton Ecumenical Partnership.

congregations are regularly fed a diet of: 'Militaristic, triumphalist language, [in which] God as male' (Few, 1999: 30). However, she observes that:

[I]t's not enough just to start changing pronouns and substituting she for he and mother for father in a rather crude but unthought-out attempt at political correctness. It's the underlying imagery that needs changing also... What is needed is to find new names, a language that is current and relevant and expresses what we experience of God today. (Few, 1999: 30).

So where does this leave us? Learning hopefully that to slip female pronouns into worship and hope no-one is offended is not the answer. It is clearly a theological task, but one which must relate to worship as it occurs in Baptist churches, overcoming fear and prejudice. Here, surely the third person of the Trinity, the Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son, and who broods and hovers, re-creates and enlivens will lead us into this as into all truth. (Few, 1999: 32).

'[T]he very use of the masculine 'Him' limits our thoughts. God is not a man. All life, the masculine and the feminine, is a living expression of His boundless thought and love. May there not be something of that loving God that woman can teach? May not even womanhood itself reveal Him who is our Mother... A woman thinks in terms of people not profits; creation not destruction; a world believing in force destroys itself; it is the Eternal Mother, God, who teaches that the Kingdom must be built by spiritual power; cannot a woman reveal this?'

**Violet Hedger**, BQ, X, 1940-41, pp.243-253 (Quoted in Briggs, 1986: 347).

# 7 ENGAGING WITH SCRIPTURE

Debate over the 'difficult passages' is nothing new. John Briggs, in his history of The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century, notes the following:

From the very beginning of the century questions were raised as to what part women should play in the churches: the first issue of the *Baptist Magazine* [1809] raised the question of the appropriateness of women voting in church meeting. The following year there was debate as to whether it was right for them to give testimony in church prior to their being accepted as church members. Whilst some argued a Pauline prohibition, others maintained that this was a misapplication of Scripture. (Briggs, 1994: 278).

Biblical considerations continued to inform public debate through the twentieth century as well, as the following snapshot from the pages of The Baptist Times shows:

Some Baptists believed that Paul's statement, 'I permit no woman to teach', was timeless [BT, 3 May 1962, p.6]. Cynthia Allegro, a deaconess, pointed, however, to the example in John's Gospel of the woman at the well, who told a whole city, including men, about Jesus [BT, 17 May 1962, p.6]. Henton Davies argued that the thrust of scripture showed the equality of men and women before the fall and in salvation [BT, 31 May 1962, p.10]. Constance Nash, another deaconess, could not believe she had acted against God's will in responding to the Superintendent's suggestion and taking pastoral charge in Donnington Wood, Wellington, which had not had a minister for fifty years. The church has since had conversions and baptisms [BT, 7 June 1962, p.10]. (Randall, 2005: 347)

It is not possible here to trace the full panoply of biblical discussion over what are often referred to as 'the difficult passages', but it is worth noting some key contributions made by Baptists.

It is surely not without significance that, within the Baptist family, it is predominantly men who have engaged in print with the biblical and theological issues surrounding women in leadership. This may reflect the fact that access to (and particularly funding for) Baptist theological education has typically been tied in with ministerial training, thus systemically excluding all but a minority of women from the arena of academic discourse. This has led to debate over these texts being one which occurs primarily within a male arena, with men arguing together over whether women can be allowed access to positions of male power.

## **a) Challenging denominational attitudes**

As has already been noted, in 1966 the Baptist Union Council received a substantial Committee report, entitled 'Women in the Service of the Denomination', which considered a range of issues including the role of the deaconess movement and the recognition of women ministers. As part of this

report, the authors included a 'Theological Statement' which includes engagement with the biblical text. This is worth reproducing in full here, as it is the closest to an official Baptist statement on the issue that has been found, having been presented to Council and subsequently made available for circulation, including a report in *The Baptist Times* of 17 March, 1966.

The 'Theological Statement' is as follows:

Baptists have always sought to base their beliefs and practice on their understanding of the Gospel as set forth in Scripture. That they do not always agree in their understanding of the exact nature of Scriptural authority and the interpretation of particular passages must be admitted, however.

In the view of the Committee, consideration of the place of women in the service of the Church should start from:

(1) the recognition given by our Lord during his earthly ministry to women, a recognition unusual at the time and contrary to current Jewish practice.

(2) the clear declaration of the Apostle Paul that in Christ there is neither male nor female (Galatians 3, 28). In the Kingdom of God there are no second-class citizens or subordinate groups based on sex, race or social position.

All the privileges and responsibilities of Christian discipleship are open to men and women alike. Moreover, the presence and guidance of the Lord, the Spirit, is promised to the Church for the ordering of its life and the fulfilment of its mission.

A number of passages in the Pauline correspondence appear to be inconsistent with the attitude of our Lord and with the basic assertion of the Apostle. 1 Corinthians 14, 34-35; 1 Corinthians 11, 2-16, and 1 Timothy 2, 5-15, all seem to imply the subordination of women to man and seek to limit, if not entirely prevent, women from sharing in the leadership of corporate worship or in the direction of the Church's life. But even within the 1 Corinthians 11 passage, verse 11 should be noted.

The New Testament does not yield a biblical basis for either the acceptance or the rejection of the ordination of women. It proclaims the central facts of redemption through Christ, in the light of which we have to examine the situation in which we live. In the New Testament the building up of the Body of Christ is always done with a view to its mission to the world. So forms of ministry take account of the contemporary situation. Our biblical witness is no longer in a world untouched by the Gospel. The impetus towards the equality of women came from the Gospel and in discussing the application of biblical teaching to the ministry of women today, we have to take account of the changed conditions – changed in part by the Gospel itself. The Church lives in historical continuity with its origins but it is always

called to give a fresh expression to its eschatological message.

There are in the membership of Baptist Churches, some who believe that the detailed Pauline injunctions in the above paragraph remain binding on Christians. The committee cannot accept this view. It appears to them that the Galatians passage is the more fundamental. There are in the New Testament a number of indications that a few women at least played a considerable and well-recognised part in the life of the early church. The references to Phoebe and Priscilla, for example, are worthy of note. Both must clearly be regarded as having exercised special public forms of ministry.

The Committee is further of the opinion that there is no evidence that any of the particular forms and categories of ministry referred to in the New Testament are intended to be binding on the Church for all time or to exclude new differentiations or adaptations. This indeed, is what has occurred in every age and among Baptists as among Christians of other traditions. Baptists have been unable to accept the view held by certain Christian traditions that the pattern of ministry was fixed from the beginning for all time and depends on a hierarchy of office and a carefully guarded and restricted succession.

The Committee believes that witness-bearing and ministry are the continuing responsibility of the whole Church; that within this general responsibility, particular individuals should be set aside for special tasks; and that there are no grounds of principle or doctrine for debarring women duly qualified from any of the special forms of ministry. (BUGB, 1967: 2-4)

## **b) Relationship not hierarchy**

The preceding 'Theological Statement' notes that: 'There are in the membership of Baptist Churches, some who believe that the detailed Pauline injunctions ... remain binding on Christians.' However, in refutation of this position, the committee simply state that they 'cannot accept this view' because '[i]t appears to them that the Galatians [3.28] passage is the more fundamental.' Whilst this may be the case, what is lacking is a detailed engagement with the difficult passages. Paul Fiddes puts the biblical problem in a nutshell at the opening of his 1986 article 'Woman's Head is Man':<sup>10</sup>

In any discussion about the status and role of women within the Christian Church, Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 11.3 is bound to be a storm-centre. (Fiddes, 1986: 370)

To justify his own understanding of gender equality, Fiddes offers a contextualised reading of Paul's statement that 'while every man has Christ for his Head, woman's head is man, as Christ's head is God.' He denies that this passage mandates a hierarchical chain of subordination which runs God-Christ-Man-

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<sup>10</sup>Paul Fiddes is Principal Emeritus of Regent's Park Baptist College, Oxford, and Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Oxford

'My own conviction... is that women should have exactly the same opportunities as men to use the gifts that God has undoubtedly given them within the Christian ministry, and that there is no theological case for considering men, whether as husbands or church members, as spiritual leaders of women simply by virtue of their sex.'

**Paul Fiddes** (Fiddes, 1986: 370)

Woman, preferring instead to translate 'head' as 'source or origin' rather than as 'ruler' (p 371). By this understanding, Paul is creating a series of analogous relationships: God-Christ, Christ-Humanity, Man-Woman, and that these analogies represent not a hierarchy but three sets of 'covenantal relationships' (p 372). This leads Fiddes to assert that:

When we place the sets of relationships (God-Christ, Christ-Humanity, Christ-Church, Man-Woman) side by side, it becomes clear that a basic feature of them all is the difference of function between the partners. Each partner has his or her own distinctive contribution to the relationship; creator cannot be confused with creature, nor can the divine Father and Son simply be regarded as different names for a general divine essence. This suggests that in the male-female covenant, there is also a particular contribution made by each sex which cannot simply be replaced by the other. The differences must not be obliterated in belief about fundamental equality in Christ; the 'otherness' of male to female... must be respected and allowed for as a factor that enriches the relationship. (Fiddes, 1986: 372)

However, this observation does not in itself resolve the issue as to whether the difference between male and female is one which involves subordination and hierarchy. For this thorny question, Fiddes turns to a point of hermeneutical principle:

We should make it our aim so deeply to understand the response of the biblical writers to God's will in their time, that we are able to make our response in ours. God's demand upon our lives, which is his eternal purpose for human life, is bound to come to us as commands in specific circumstances. But we must take care not simply to identify the concrete form of the demand (the command) in one time and place with the eternal demand. (Fiddes, 1986: 375)

This then allows him to say that:

The eternal 'principle' of God's relationship with humankind is covenant, a relationship of partnership set up by God's own loving desire... Thus the belief of Paul about 'headship' or 'origins' in I Corinthians 11.3 clearly directs us to understand the male-female relationships in the light both of God's covenant with the world, and of his own relationships within his Being which... we may dare to call a 'covenant' between the Father and the



Son in the love of the Spirit. (Fiddes, 1986: 375)

Having thus offered an understanding of the male-female relationship which is to be understood by analogy to the relationships which exist within the trinitarian God, Fiddes asserts that 'Paul is propounding gender differences, but not a hierarchy' (p 380). He concludes:

I do not think, therefore, that it will help us today to enforce Paul's statement that 'woman's head is man' as any kind of governing principle. But we do need to gain an understanding of the covenant in divine and human relations that lies behind Paul's statement of 'headship'. In such a covenant, the partners each have their distinctive contribution to make, and yet in their mutual indwelling they share their functions and characteristics with each other. Since the saying in 1 Corinthians 11.3 summons us to reflect upon this kind of covenant, we cannot do without it. It stands as a sign-post to the meaning of the declaration that 'In Christ there is neither male nor female'. (Fiddes, 1986: 381-2)

'Man and woman, created for partnership, have been redeemed for partnership in service. It is high time to make that partnership truly effective in the service of God and his world.'

**George Beasley-Murray** (Beasley-Murray, 1983, quoted in Few, 1999: 9)

### c) The freedom of women who are called by God

In a series of two articles published in the Baptist Ministers' Journal (October 2006 and January 2007), Simon Woodman offers 'A biblical basis for affirming women in ministry'.<sup>11</sup>

'It has never struck me as a reasonable argument to suggest that one's gender should provide a suitable means for determining one's suitability for ministry. The Bible is quite clear on the qualities that are required for Christian ministry, and provided an individual, of whatever gender, satisfies these requirements it is my belief that they are suitable to minister in the church. As a colleague of mine remarked when I asked his opinion on whether women should be ministers: "It depends on the woman."'

**Simon Woodman** (Woodman, 2006: 8)

His paper surveys a range of examples of women ministering in the Bible, and highlights the importance of Galatians 3:28, 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' as 'Paul's grand statement... of the value-base of the new community of Christ's people.' However, Woodman notes that Paul then follows

<sup>11</sup>Simon Woodman is Minister of Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London and former Tutor in Biblical Studies at South Wales Baptist College.

this just a few paragraphs later with, 'you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another' (Gal. 5:13). This leads Woodman to conclude that:

Paul does not shy away from asking Christians to sacrifice the freedoms that are theirs in Christ, for the sake of the unity and public witness of the church. (Woodman, 2006: 9)

This insight provides a hermeneutical key with which to approach the three 'difficult' Pauline passages of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16; 14:33b-36 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15:

Overall, then, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 does not lend itself to an understanding of male authority. It recognises that the male-female relationship parallels those between God and Christ, and between Christ and humanity, in terms of interdependence and unity. Paul is using this parallel to make an intensely pastoral point about propriety in public worship, and his intention in writing was not to deal with gender issues, but to provide pastoral instruction in a specific context. Paul's priorities were love, unity and good witness, and whilst the freedom of Galatians 3:28 may be his ideal, this freedom didn't mean that the believers were free to throw off all customs to the detriment of the church's unity and public witness. (Woodman, 2006: 12)

The second of the passages from 1 Corinthians is understood in a similar vein:

It was common practise in worship to interrupt the speaker to ask a question of clarification, or to make a relevant point... The problem was that the granting of equal participation in worship to uneducated women, could so easily have led to them disrupting services by continually asking inappropriate questions. So to avoid this and preserve propriety and order, Paul proposes both short-term and long-term solutions to the problem. The short-term solution is that women should keep quiet in worship, and refrain from asking uneducated and disruptive questions. The long-term solution is that women should receive education in the form of private tuition from their husbands. These solutions were actually more progressive than restrictive, as Paul is not doubting the abilities of women to learn, and he is opening the door for them to receive an education that would otherwise not be available to them. However, until that long term solution paid dividends, Paul was concerned to preserve dignity and propriety in public worship. (Woodman, 2007: 10)

And again with regards to 1 Timothy 2:8-15:

In the face of these two concerns: that the church's witness not be harmed, and that uneducated women not be given teaching responsibility in a congregation facing the difficulties of false teaching, it is easy to see why Paul proposes the solutions that he does. As with 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36, Paul proposes both short-term and long-term solutions. The

short-term solution is that women should not take up positions of teaching authority in the church. Whilst the long-term solution is that women should be educated (v.11). (Woodman, 2007: 11)

This leads Woodman to conclude that:

Paul welcomes the freedom of women to minister in his churches, except where it is exercised in such a way as to compromise the church's unity and public witness. Of his own ministry, Paul says, 'though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them... I have become all things to all people, so that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel.' [1 Cor. 9:19,22-23.] It seems that he expects no less of those in his congregations. (Woodman, 2007: 13)

'As long as our dominant models of ministry remain informed by predominantly male patterns of pastoral leadership, we will continue to be denied the true richness of ministry that is potentially ours in Christ; even those women who are called to the office of pastoral ministry will face the expectation that they have to become, in some sense, 'honorary men' in order to fulfil their calling. If the Christian community could truly grasp Paul's radical vision for gender equality, women would be called to ministry as women, and free to minister as women. It is tragically true that nearly two thousand years after Paul wrote Galatians 3:28, the Christian church still retains divisions based on race, class and gender. It is equally tragic when the public witness of the church is compromised because the prevailing culture has a clearer grasp on human equality, than does the community of Christ's people. The time has now come for the church to adopt wholeheartedly what it has always known; that both women and men are called and gifted by God for the task of ministry in the church of Christ.'

**Simon Woodman & Stephen Finamore** (Woodman, 2007: 13-14)

#### **d) The legacy of Eve**

When considering the impact of the biblical narrative on ways in which churches handle gender difference, the significance of the fall narrative and the responsibility ascribed to Eve within it must not be underestimated. Jenny Few addresses this issue in her wide-ranging essay *Hats and WI(w)GS: Personal Reflections of the Baptist Union Women's Working Group*. She observes:

Taken to extreme, the theology built upon the Genesis texts has given rise to male dominance in all its excesses, from benign patronage which treats women as the weaker sex and doffs hats and opens doors, to the worst possible abuse and cruelty where women are slaves, denied their basic human rights, the object of sexual and sadistic pleasures. And all stages in between. (Few, 1999: 17)

In response, she draws attention to the first of the two Genesis narratives recounting the creation of humans:

Genesis 1:27-28 – So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them....

Few comments on this passage that:

On the sixth and final day God makes mankind to reflect the divine image, and this image is both male and female. The priestly story-teller does not speak of rank or worth, he simply says that (hu)mankind is created in two forms, male and female, and that both, in complementarity, reflect the image of the deity. (Few, 1999: 18)

She goes on to observe that:

... the Genesis text refers to *male and female* made in the image of God, and that together they are given responsibility over the rest of creation. For women, used to second-class status, this reaffirmation of themselves also reflecting the image of God is a source of wonder. It has led many women to think and meditate on and ponder the nature of God from that perspective. It also makes a nonsense of male dominance in the church which seeks to reveal God to the world in a consistently male form. (Few, 1999:18)

From this positive reading of Genesis 1, Few then turns to Genesis 2 and the 'spare rib' creation account, arguing that precedence in order of creation does not necessarily mean superiority in a hierarchy of authority. Few playfully suggests that an alternative reading could be that the Genesis creation order is from the lowest to the highest forms of life, thus placing woman as the pinnacle of creation. This then leads her to a consideration of the fall narrative in Genesis 3, and the question Eve's responsibility for the loss of Eden. Few helpfully observes that the egalitarian relationship of Eden is only distorted at the fall, meaning the dominance of man over woman is to be seen as a distortion of God's perfect creation, rather than as a part of it. However, the conclusion she offers is less optimistic:

Fascinating as all this is, it can never blot out the powerful tradition and the weight of theological thought down the years, that it was woman's curiosity and weakness which tempted man and led him astray, and caused him to disobey God. Eve was the one who was to blame, and like Pandora, her Greek equivalent, let loose mischief and 'sin' into the world, destroying innocence for ever. So with devastating logic, men have been wary of women ever since, afraid that they will be forever tempted not only to eat forbidden fruit (usually of a sexual nature) but also to turn away from God. For Christian men, this will never do, so the only answer has been to control and hold sway over woman in some form or another ever since. (Few, 1999: 20)

## e) The inclusion of women in God's inclusive story

In 2007, Sean Winter contributed an article to *Talk Magazine*, published by *Mainstream*, the Baptist 'Word and Spirit Network'.<sup>12</sup>

In this article, Winter grounds his reading of Paul's inclusive statement of Galatians 3:26-28 within the broader context of 'God's inclusive story':

Pauline theology is rooted in a story. The story's opening scenes consist of a retelling of an inherited narrative of creation and covenant making: God's purposes for the world and for Israel respectively... The world is being remade 'in Christ' but this recreation begins in the community of those who have become God's true children, through faith (3:26). (Winter, 2007: 1)

This 'inclusive story' is expressed, in Galatians, primarily in terms of the inclusion of the Gentiles into God's people. But, notes Winter, 'God's inclusive story is not limited to issues of ethnic identity' (p 2). Rather, it also encompasses social distinction and gender difference, and it is in Baptism that believers, 'enter into the great story of God's gracious, inclusive love' (p 2). Winter asserts that:

These verses, which in so many ways sum up the main tenets of Paul's theology as a whole, offer us a new vision of human identity, Christian community and transformed society... The story is about how we handle difference and diversity in every aspect of human life and community. (Winter, 2007: 2)

These observations about the inclusiveness of God's story, as expressed in Paul's letter to the Galatians, allow Winter to conclude that:

[O]ur common baptism in Christ, as male and female [constitutes] the obliteration of dominance of one gender over another. In God's inclusive story, gender is not a decisive issue. (Winter, 2007: 2)

## f) The Bible as a dynamic word

Also writing from within the *Mainstream* stable, Stephen Ibbotson offers a paper on 'Eschatological Hermeneutic and Gender'.<sup>13</sup> He suggests that 'the problem' which leads to the low numbers of women in ministry 'must lie in the culture of the churches'. He tells the following story:

When I expressed my concern about this state of affairs to this all male gathering of leaders a fortnight later, none expressed surprise or shared my concern. One seemed to indicate the matter was settled by the Bible, ruling

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<sup>12</sup>Sean Winter is Academic Dean, Co-ordinator of Studies in New Testament for the Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania and in the Uniting Church Theological College in Melbourne, Australia. He is also the former Tutor in Biblical Studies at the Northern Baptist College.

<sup>13</sup>Prior to his retirement, Stephen Ibbotson was the Pastor of Altrincham Baptist Church, and a member of the Mainstream wider apostolic team.

out the possibility of women being recognised in such a calling. That was the end of the matter. The Bible stated it – discussion over. But even if the Bible had permitted it, I had the strong feeling that the issue was not of sufficient importance to warrant either consideration or effort. The real business was preaching the gospel and evangelism or introducing the latest favoured project within the evangelical world. (Ibbotson, 2008: 1)

Ibbotson highlights the importance of ‘principles of interpretation’ in determining the conclusions one comes to when reading the Bible. He asks the question:

[I]s there a way of handling biblical material on gender relations in a way that holds to the truth of Scripture but organises those texts to make sense of them as a whole without casting them into a framework that feels obsolete, patriarchal and is quite frankly sexist according to the perspective of our culture? I believe there is. (Ibbotson, 2008: 3)

Scripture, suggests Ibbotson, should be seen less as a repository of ethical and doctrinal regulations, and more as the ‘bearer of a narrative’ which gives testimony to God’s dealing with the whole of humanity and creation; less as an instruction manual for living and more as a storyboard for a play in which the characters improvise their own lines within a broad framework. To this end, he suggests that:

Our role as performers is to engage ourselves in the play, helping one another with the tricky task of looking both ways, remaining true to the story thus far, and orientating ourselves towards the future that is coming towards us, but certainly *living faithfully in the now of our particular time in human history and salvation-history*. (Ibbotson, 2008: 5)

Such an approach allows readers to ‘prioritise *eschatological movement over cultural stasis*’ in their approach to scripture, freeing them from reading the text as a ‘flat’ document which must be applied in the same way in every day and age, and instead opening up the text as a dynamic document, speaking the word of God afresh by the Spirit to each new generation. Ibbotson concludes:

Paul’s inclusion of gender re-ordering in this key text [Gal. 3:28] can only be explained historically if we assume there was something quite fundamental in the practice of Jesus himself with regard to women, which had imprinted itself on the early communities of the Jesus movement that had changed relations between men and women. Evidence that this was the case is found in the memories captured by the Synoptics as well as in Paul’s practice of women as co-workers in his mission. It is this radical trajectory that gave Paul the insight to include transformation of gender relations at the heart of his gospel.

And it is his *movement* not his stasis we must follow as Christ’s kingdom trajectory continues to arc across history. This trajectory has been discerned with greater clarity by secularists than many Christians. This gladdens my heart for its effect for women. It saddens my heart for its

effect on our witness. But God has always anointed many Cyruses (Isaiah 45:1), while all male ministers' meetings continue to busy themselves within the ghetto of their diminishing world. Lord! Give me some fresh air! (Ibbotson, 2008: 7-8)

### **g) The way we read scripture**

In an address given at a seminar at the Baptist Assembly in 2008, Vivienne O'Brien addressed the issue of 'Men and Women in Ministry'.<sup>14</sup> In this address, she noted that 'when we read the Bible, we don't do so neutrally. We bring who we are and where we come from as well as our life experiences. We bring our assumptions, our attitudes, our beliefs and our prejudices.' Having thus highlighted the importance of the questions which readers bring to the text of scripture, O'Brien turns to a consideration of the issue of women in leadership.

She notes that in the Genesis 1 account of creation, 'human kind [are] created simultaneously. They are created male and female. They rule together. There is no hint of inequality or subordination. They are entirely complementary.' It is in the Genesis 2 account, that which is 'favoured by proponents of headship and submission', that we find the account of the female being created out of the man, with the purpose of being his helper. However, O'Brien rightly asks:

But where does it say that because she was created after man she is subordinate to him? The woman is formed from his rib because God does not want the man to be alone. She is of the same substance, bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh, he immediately recognises her as a human like himself. She has been created to be his partner, a helper. He needs her. (O'Brien, 2008).

It is in the account of the fall in Genesis 3 that O'Brien traces the origin of the theological attempt to 'justify the unequal place of women in church and society':

Eve, the female prototype, has gone down in history as temptress and deceiver and women have been living this down ever since. (O'Brien, 2008)

O'Brien then surveys the Graeco-Roman and Jewish cultural assumptions regarding the place of women, before reviewing the list of women given by Paul in Romans 16, all of whom she notes he affirms in their ministries. She then looks in more detail at the three 'difficult passages' from 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy, stressing the original context for these letters as a key to understanding Paul's instructions to women. She concludes:

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<sup>14</sup>Before her retirement, Vivienne O'Brien was a Baptist Minister and Ministries Adviser to the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

Would Paul really say that women today should not be in leadership if they were qualified and gifted. Life for women is very different in the western world especially from that of Corinth and Ephesus. Women are not restricted as they were in Paul's day. Married women are not secluded. Women are educated, we vote and we are not regarded as minors all our lives... I believe Paul affirmed women who were gifted and qualified to lead and teach...

[Paul was] a man who, while working within the conventions of his time, none the less, looked ahead to a day when the church would be free of barriers, hostility and hierarchical attitudes. (O'Brien, 2008)

## **h) Justice and relationships which reveal God's life**

Also at the Baptist Assembly in 2008, Pat Took addressed the meeting of the Baptist Ministers' Fellowship on the topic of 'In His Image.'<sup>15</sup> This was published later that same year in the Baptist Ministers' Journal.

She begins by referring to the momentous decision of the Baptist Union Council to issue an apology concerning the transatlantic slave trade, and makes the link between the dehumanising fracture within society caused by blasphemous attitudes to racial difference, and what she describes as 'that other, deeper, subtler and most enduring of all fractures: the breakdown in the relationship between Adam and Eve.' (p 2).

Took highlights the cost paid by both men and women as a result of this fracture within humanity, with women being 'habitually enslaved, beaten, despised, raped, discarded and silenced' and men suffering 'deep emotional and psychological estrangement' (p 3). She suggests that:

At the heart of all this is the refusal to accept as equal one who is made equal, one who is made, loved and redeemed by God. (Took, 2008: 3)

Healing for this deep fracture can be found, Took believes, 'in the redemptive work of Christ and in the church when it is truly his body – when it is truly the redeemed community' (p 4). And yet this hope must be set alongside a history of 'ecclesiastical misogyny', with the church allowing itself to become drawn 'into patterns of organisation based on domination, on structures of exclusion and of power that always work against wholesome community and always disadvantage women' (p 4).

'I want to say to my brothers in Christ: you need us. You need us first of all simply on the human level, as those created to labour with you for the good of our world. In the body of Christ you urgently need us.'

**Pat Took** (Took, 2008: 10)

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<sup>15</sup>Prior to her retirement, Pat Took was the Team Leader for the Regional Ministry Team of the London Baptist Association, and was formerly Superintendent of the Metropolitan Area.



Took contends that the church's typical understanding of ordained ministry has been defined in terms of status and success rather than mutuality and collaboration, with patterns of leadership being modelled on the culture of the business world and the political arena. In other words, ministry has been defined in male terms, something which not only inherently excludes women, but also diminishes those men who find themselves drawn into such unbalanced expressions of leadership.

Against this bleak assessment of the status quo, Took offers a trinitarian model of ministry:

The richness of collaboration and creative partnership at the heart of God is beautifully expressed in the last discourse in John's Gospel, where the different expressions of God merge and separate in an elaborate dance of love. Between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, each does the will of the other, each separately plays a part in drawing humanity into the dance. Each is promised as an abiding presence and yet there is but one will and deity. It is the language of poetry: we see a flame of love now united, now separated, always life giving and illuminating. And it is in the image of this richness of personhood that humanity is created male and female. (Took, 2008: 6)

'If the church is to speak the whole truth of the Gospel, it needs to hear the voices of the daughters and the maidservants on whom the Spirit was poured out so that they might prophecy. If their voices are silenced God's whole truth cannot be heard.'

**Pat Took** (Took, 2008: 10)

The interrelationships that exist within God are thus taken as a model for the interrelationships within humanity, resulting in an understanding of what it means to be human where there, 'is an equality of dignity, an equality of divine origin, an equality of human giftedness, but also a richness of diversity' (p 6). Thus:

[M]en are not the image of God alone and neither are women. Men are not called to govern the natural world alone, but only with women, women only with men... If either man or woman were to try this alone they would be radically disabled by the loss of their proper colleague in the enterprise, and that is of course what we see has happened. (Took, 2008: 6)

This leads Took to suggest that:

[A]ny gospel of redemption that holds out a hope for a new humanity must be seen to overcome the wretchedness of loss and alienation that is experienced in misogyny and domination. (Took, 2008: 7)

So Took points to the good news of Jesus, whose life portrays a gospel which affirms, heals and liberates women from the oppressive structures of human

society. The kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus is one which rejects and subverts hierarchies and exclusions, a kingdom marked by mutual service rather than by aggressive and competitive relationships. This, suggests Took, is a true gospel of redemption.

‘If the church is to be true to Jesus in the way it lives there must [be] space in it for women who are evangelists, who are priests, who are prophets and teachers and apostles.’

**Pat Took** (Took, 2008: 10)

Finally, Took highlights the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in transforming the community of Christ’s followers. She points to the inclusive community which emerges at Pentecost, with young, old, slave, free, men and women being ‘included in the blessing and the responsibility of proclaiming the word of God’ (p 9). This same Pentecost Spirit continues to create Pentecost community among the people who follow Jesus. She concludes:

It is time we trusted the gospel message, to let go of our fears, our defences and our anger, and to find each other again in this new creation, as those in whom the image of the God of mutual love is being restored. (Took, 2008: 10)

# 8

## PREJUDICE OR CONSCIENCE?

Clearly, the issue of women in leadership in Baptist congregations is a far from settled issue. The trajectory of engagement traced through this reader so far speaks ample testimony to this fact. From pragmatic discussions at Baptist Union Council, to historical, theological and biblical engagement by a range of Baptist scholars, the issue of women in leadership has remained one which is unresolved for us as a denomination. There remains a discrepancy between the 'official position' and the reality in many of our churches.

At the Baptist Assembly in 2002 David Coffey, then General Secretary of the Baptist Union, 'drew attention to the issue of women in ministry as needing to be investigated fully.' This resulted in a mixed response, with some rejoicing at the opportunity to raise the issue at a denominational level, but with others expressing concern that, 'to go down this pathway at this stage reflects uncertainty in our convictions' (Sherman, 2002).

The Women's Issues Working Group identified five key concerns which they hoped might inform any revisiting of this issue (Sherman, 2002):

- i. to ensure that any discussion concerning women in ministry is undertaken as part of our understanding of the nature and calling of the Church, and not as a debate about equality/rights;
- ii. to resource the Leadership Team, in particular the General Secretary, in their task of helping diverse congregations 'to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace';
- iii. to be alert to issues of prejudice wherever they emerge dressed as other concerns;
- iv. to counter the continuing idolisation of the 'ideal/normal' which creates a pedestal for the married male minister with a wife who will involve herself with children's and women's work, thus creating unwarranted pressures for those who apparently fit the 'ideal' and excluding those who don't;
- v. to be alert to the presentation of issues through The Baptist Times and to encourage the editor to continue to commission articles by critical and thoughtful Baptist scholars.

The direct outcome of David Coffey's revisiting of this issue was the 2006 publication of the BUGB booklet, *Women, Baptists and Ordination*. This pamphlet aims to cover a number of bases, providing: 'some theology, some testimonies, some questions and some further resources.' (p 5) It is not felt necessary to reproduce this material here, as this publication is readily available from BUGB as part of its current publications list. reproduce this material here, as this publication is readily available from BUGB as part of its current publications list.

'For over eighty years the Baptist Union of Great Britain has encouraged the ordination of women and affirmed their contribution to the life and mission of Baptist churches. Whilst I believe this is a cause for celebration, there remains a concern that this recognition has not always been outworked in the context of the local church.'

**David Coffey** (in Troughton, 2006: 4)

The sense of division within the churches of the Union is highlighted by Nigel Wright, who in an unpublished paper from 2004 entitled 'Justice, Conscience and the Ministry of Women', seeks to locate the debate within a broader discussion of inclusivity and freedom of conscience.<sup>16</sup> To this end he traces the following trajectory:

One suspects that the movement... is from right to left. In other words... the greater inclusion of women, of minority ethnic groups and of those whose theological views or whose lifestyle preferences are more 'progressive' than the conservative majority. In pursuit of this desirable end (and it is desirable) a strategy for inclusion tends to work in the following ways:

- In the beginning, there is an unquestioned assumption within the tradition, as for instance that women are not called to ordained office.
- Secondly, with time a departure from the received norm asks to be considered as an acceptable possibility within the context of the whole. A minority of Baptists became persuaded that women could serve in ordained office and asks quite reasonably for freedom to follow their consciences even if the majority is unpersuaded.
- Thirdly, with the passage of further time the minority view is accepted by the majority, and the place of women in ordained office comes to be seen as not only possible but desirable. The shift now is from tolerance to promotion of this cause.
- Fourthly, the new majority view becomes the new orthodoxy which the majority is in a position to enforce, thus excluding from full participation those who adhere to the older view and are now in the minority

A strategy of inclusion in this way runs the risk of becoming one of exclusion and raises the question as to whether the new liberality (I avoid the word 'liberalism') will behave illiberally. There is no question that the Baptist Union is now poised between stages three and four and how it behaves at this point is crucially significant. (Wright, 2004: 3-4)

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<sup>16</sup>Nigel Wright is Principal Emeritus of Spurgeon's College, and a former President of the Baptist Union.

Wright distinguishes between *prejudice* and *conscience*, and argues that while prejudice should be opposed as sinful, freedom of conscience should be respected. This leads him to suggest that 'the issue for discernment becomes not so much *what* a person's views are as *how* they are held, with prejudice or in good conscience' (p 5). In this way, Wright is encouraging the Union to find a way forwards which facilitates ongoing inclusion of those who wish, *in good conscience and not for reasons of prejudice*, to oppose the ministry of women. However, the practical outworking of this plea for 'freedom of conscience' is frequently far from tolerance and reasonableness. For example, what of the woman sensing a call to ministry from within a congregation which *in good conscience* believes that women cannot be so called? The practical outworking of 'freedom of conscience' too easily becomes an experience of abuse as God's calling on a person's life is stifled.

'[T]his particular issue... cannot be treated simply as some else's 'private' view – it is something that has a profound effect on the lives of others, especially when preached and taught, and thus has ethical implications. I can be open to those who are theologically different from myself, but I don't believe I should be open to being abused by them where this inclusive attitude is not mutual. I feel very vulnerable that my 'denomination' is not prepared to make a stand to minimise my experience of this kind of abuse, and even more vulnerable when it is deliberately removed from a discourse of 'justice'... it is not about freedom to merely 'hold a view', but freedom to affect another's freedom, which is why it is so important that those in positions of power are not given the impression that they are 'entitled' to exercise such a freedom with the Union's blessing.'

**Jo Harding, 2004**

Nigel Wright's position must be set against those voices who would argue that prejudice is still prejudice, even if it is prejudice held in good conscience, and that it is therefore still sinful.

One such voice, and an influential one, can be found in that of *Baptist Mainstream*, whose *Mainstream North Leadership Team* issued, in January 2007, what has become known as 'The Blackley Declaration'.

Daniel Grote, in a lead article for *The Baptist Times*, reported this as follows:

*Denomination's Pulpit Sexism is a 'cultural sin'*

The paucity of women Baptist ministers is evidence of 'cultural sin' and based on 'an inadequate way of understanding Scripture', according to leaders of an influential Baptist Movement.

In a strongly-worded statement, leaders of the northern regional grouping

of Mainstream decry the low number of women in Baptist ministry – slightly more than 10 per cent – and urge churches ‘to be more alert to the sexism we believe exists among us’.

‘We remain troubled that having been one of the first denominations to recognise the ordained ministry of women, there is still such a low percentage of women [ministers],’ reads the statement.

‘We . . . believe that our lack of attention and unchanging practice in this area is symptomatic of our failure to be a beacon of hope of the Kingdom in our society,’ it adds. (BT, 1 February 2007: 1)

Mainstream have taken their commitment seriously, and their website includes a range of articles which address issues surrounding women in ministry. Some of these represent serious scholarly engagement (including those by Stephen Ibbotson and Sean Winter discussed above), while others take a more narrative and colloquial approach. c

The strategy document of BUGB, also issued in February 2007, sets specific strategic goals which it aims to meet within ‘the next five years’ (ie by 2012). One of these includes a commitment to:

Promote an increase in the number of women candidates for ministry with a view to achieving parity between women and men.

In support of this strategic goal, various Associations and Colleges have taken the initiative to organise events aimed at engaging with women who are sensing a call to ministry (eg YBA ‘Ikea’ event, 2007; Bristol ‘Women in Ministry’ day, 2008). The efforts by the Colleges to recruit more women for ministerial formation are long-running, and it is worth noting that in 1991 the joint Principals meeting issued a *Declaration of Intent* regarding women in ministry. However, their efforts need to be set alongside the research conducted by Dianne Tidball in 1990 into women training for Baptist ministry.<sup>17</sup> She notes that:

At every stage of making an application to college, women are likely to face opposition and prejudice. They are likely to have had their ‘calling’ questioned repeatedly and to be asked regularly about domestic arrangements and whether as women they have the resources to cope with the task... The Baptist ministry is in general terms sex stereotyped with distinctive roles for men and women... The church, while allowing women to be ordained, has largely kept women in a secondary role. (Tidball, 1990: 392, 394-5)

It would be encouraging if the situation were dramatically different in the nearly two decades since Tidball’s research. However, In May 2008, the Regional Team Leaders issued a joint statement, in which they say:

[W]e are greatly concerned at the relatively low numbers of women on the

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<sup>17</sup>Before her retirement, Dianne Tidball was Regional Minister Team Leader with the East Midland Baptist Association, and is a former President of the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

accredited list and the clear difficulty women ministers have in finding a call to a pastorate amongst our churches. This represents a great loss of gifting and experience to the churches which is also often further reflected and rooted in a general lack of women in local leadership too. All too frequently it results in those called by God not being affirmed and their spiritual gifting being marginalised.

Whilst we do all we can as Team Leaders to encourage our churches to consider female as well as male ministers when a pastoral vacancy occurs, it is clear that the overall issue of how women and men should share in the leadership of churches needs to be addressed within our Baptist family – openly seeking a fully biblical way forward.

# 9

## SURVEYING THE BAPTIST ASSEMBLY

The Women's Justice Committee, formerly known as the Women's Issues Working Group, was established by Baptist Union Council in 1996, and charged with looking 'at every aspect of the life of the Union with a view to promoting the gifts and ministries of women.' (Few, 1999: 3) Whilst this may appear a positive move, it needs to be heard in its wider context of a preceding decision not to address structurally the issue of gender disparity within Baptist Union Council. Jenny Few makes her frustration clear:

Let's be clear about what happened here. A predominantly male Council refused to allow a resolution that would significantly increase women's (lay and ordained) representation on Council, but at the same time allowed itself to set up the Women's Issues Working Group. In the current climate of political correctness it would have been difficult to say 'no' to this resolution... but on the other hand, Council had refused to take the opportunity to act positively in favour of women. (Few, 1999: 3)

The vision for the WIWG, agreed by Council, is as follows:

The Baptist Union Council is committed to encouraging at all levels of Baptist life the 'Kingdom Vision' of women and men serving together in Christian community. (Few, 1999: 33)

It was in accord with this vision that in May 2008, the Women's Justice Committee undertook a survey of the Baptist Assembly. Whilst the full report is not available for widespread dissemination, and primarily functions to inform the ongoing debate about the shape of Assembly, it contains some substantive theological reflection which directly informs the current debate, and the process of listening to these voices from amongst us helpfully highlights the issues we continue to face.

Jo Harding<sup>18</sup>, in her presentation of the summary of the findings, comments:

I want to begin this report with words of encouragement. By its very nature some of this report will be hard to read. This survey has purposefully solicited critique of Assembly in relation to issues and experiences that expose injustice, division and deep pain among and between us as women and men in this Baptist community. There is an open wound in the Body of Christ which needs tending with the urgent-patient, fierce-gentleness of the Gospel that calls us all equally into the Life of God. This survey offered a space in which women were invited to 'speak it as it is' for them, without being required to smile and express things 'nicely', so many of them did. Even a cursory glance at the attached data cannot avoid facing up to its

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<sup>18</sup>Jo Harding was a member of the Women's Justice Committee.



uncomfortable mixture of pain and pleasure, appreciation and frustration, careful analysis and eloquent anger, energy and defeat, hope and lament. (p 1)

The findings are then presented under some general headings, which are followed below.

### **a) Encouragements**

Many positive comments were received, including the choice of a female main speaker, worship leader, musicians, technical crew and signers. Inclusivity of language and shared participation between a man and a woman in the leading of communion were also noted.

### **b) Authority and Power**

The report notes that:

A large number of observations made fall naturally under this heading. Some are quite cutting, some are critical of individuals, some pick up on atmospheres and appearances and small details in order to make bigger points. Some experiences are difficult for people to put into words and so they can come out in ways that are hard to hear, but underlying them are some powerful emotional realities. (p 3)

*I felt I was just a person making up numbers. I felt pushed back into the traditional Baptist mode, organised by good men and true, but not a bit of female drive and light.*

*I didn't feel included, women were only in supporting roles.*

*I felt marginalised and under-represented. Those on stage were almost exclusively male.*

*I felt uncomfortable – it was like looking on as the 'men's club' did their back-patting etc. Felt very much the outsider.*

A number of participants referred to 'men in suits' as a form of power-dressing on main stage that conveyed authority and a businesslike dynamic, in contrast to female attire. (p 3)

Many of the interesting women who were brought up on stage were 'done-to' rather than 'doers' – interviewed, prayed for, not free to respond or to help shape the moment. (p 3-4)

The observations of this survey suggest that while we lack women in senior positions in our organisation, the power dynamics at Assembly will be unbalanced and require thoughtful subversion. (p 4)

### **c) Worship and Theology**

It has been said that we attribute to God the qualities we value most in human

beings and then we worship them. This is a form of idolatry that is guaranteed to place on the outside of God those placed on the outside of human community, and to give divine mandate to the positions of power or powerlessness we find ourselves in. In the developed and the developing world we reward power and domination, wealth and whiteness, maleness and machismo. Jesus Christ came preaching *basileia* – a new kind of world that turned over the tables of the prevailing order, cast out dissonant and oppressive powers, called the mighty to profound conversion, and was good news to those on the outside, inviting them to share table with God. (p 5-6)

If we believe that these matters of liberation, justice and equality are Gospel matters, then there are questions to ask of our worship. How far does our worship reflect what we value as a world, and how far does it reflect *basileia*? In what ways does our worship enable us to subvert the values that oppress others, and where does our language of worship attribute to God that which is rewarded in the world? Our language and practice of worship forms us as a people, by shaping the image of God in which we seek to discover ourselves, and which we make incarnate in our life together. (p 6)

Many participants commented that [worship throughout the Assembly] was largely triumphalistic and paid limited attention to inclusive language either in song or scripture. The God who was worshipped was overwhelmingly male, a 'he', an alpha male worshipped almost exclusively using male images and metaphors of power. (p 6)

*... continual reference in prayers to male god, especially 'father'*

*... non inclusive songs – men, men of toil, father, masters of wealth*

#### **d) Recommendations**

The report concludes with seven specific recommendations which, although targeted at the way in which Assembly might develop in terms of gender inclusivity, also provide a helpful framework within which to consider the wider Union response to issues of women in leadership. Assembly is the annual expression of our life together in the Baptist Union, and as such is immensely powerful in shaping the expectations of the individuals who have attended and then return to their local churches. In this way, reflection on the shape Assembly takes is helpful as we consider our life together at congregational and Association level.

The recommendations are as follows:

1. that we actively seek out and compile a list of able women speakers and worship leaders, including Baptist women.
2. that we do theological work exploring the relationship between the way we worship and the relations of power between human beings, and allow this to inform our practice.

3. that we produce 'good practice' guidelines for diversity, which are given to all Assembly speakers, worship leaders and seminar organisers, containing explicit expectations regarding gender representation and roles, language and imagery, including in the use of scripture and song.
4. that we actively research and gather together inclusive worship materials as a resource made available to leaders, and including 're-writes' of well-known material where appropriate and permitted by copyright law.
5. that we urgently address the structural imbalances which are exposed in, rather than caused by Assembly, and actively seek ways to subvert their impact upon Assembly in order to disrupt the cycles of lack in our shared life.
6. that we address as Gospel issues the social factors that diminish many women's lives and confidence and cause them to feel and be more vulnerable in the world and the church.
7. that we facilitate dialogue and raise awareness around the intersection between race and gender justice in our Baptist community. (p 10)

# 10

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This reader has been compiled to make accessible in summary form the fruit of a wider research project which involved gathering a range of material related to women in leadership in Baptist churches. The complete bibliography is included below, categorised under the following headings:

- Historical
- Biblical/theological
- Practical/pastoral
- Ecumenical

There are inevitably holes in this material that in due course should be filled in, however a picture begins to emerge which provides a useful background for the ongoing debate.

### **Historical**

This material encompasses articles on the early years of ordination of Women as Baptist ministers, Baptist Union Council papers and *The Baptist Times* extracts from 1920s; plus more general reflections on the status of women in Baptist life.

It is particularly interesting to note that the original decision to include women on the accredited list was taken for primarily pragmatic reasons, focussed around the sustentation fund, and that theological debate was apparently absent at this stage. It is encouraging to note that 40 years on from the original decision, Baptist Union Council revisited the issue and positively affirmed the ministry of women on theological and biblical grounds. However, it is salutary to note that 40 years further on from this affirmation, there is still much to be done. The current debate must learn from this, and ensure that debate in Baptist Union Council in 2010 marks not the end of the issue, but rather a start of renewed engagement.

### **Biblical/Theological**

This material includes substantive articles addressing both biblical texts and the wider theological issues that arise from the Baptist ordination of women. For example, language and imagery, feminist theology, and specific biblical interpretative issues.

This collection of papers demonstrates that voices in the Union have been consistently engaging with the topic of women in ministry for several decades as an unresolved issue. They include significant denominational voices from the last 40 years.

## **Practical/Pastoral**

This material traces a more recent trajectory. It charts the journey right up to the most recent round of discussions within the Baptist Union, Regional Team Leaders and Mainstream.

The significance of the Blackley Declaration must not be underestimated as it provides a focal point for the debate within the dominant evangelical strand of churches within the Baptist Union. These papers also include reflection on women's experience of Assembly, as well as papers generated by the current ongoing debate within Union structures of which this current reader is itself a part.

## **Ecumenical**

There is clearly a vast wealth of ecumenical material which could be drawn on in helping to frame discussions within the Baptist Family. In terms of the big picture, this is clearly an issue we face in common with the other denominations and it may be that ecumenical resources should inform our own journey. It seems to us that the current Baptist debate is simply a facet of a wider movement of God's Spirit within the church universal and indeed within society at large.

## **Conclusion**

It appears that there has been an absence of significant and open debate within the main BUGB institutional structures about the issue of women in Baptist ministry. Frequently, this is justified through citing a 'freedom of conscience' clause. It is our suggestion that this has created a vacuum in which decisive affirmation has been neglected, and in which negative opinions have continued to flourish. We believe that this is a gospel issue first and foremost, and that to neglect it further is to become once again complicit in 'institutional sin'. Given the typically reactive nature of Baptist theology to societal change, it may well be that the time is now right to address this in a way that has not been possible for previous generations of Baptists.

# 11

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## APPENDIX

In March 2010, a significant debate took place at Baptist Union Council meetings concerning the role of women in leadership and ministry within the Baptist denomination. It was recognised that more than 40 years previously, a resolution had been passed by the Council affirming the ministry of women, but that little had been done to follow this through. Thus, this debate focussed on the need to make the kind of decisive affirmation, backed by a programme of action, that would bring about real institutional change. As a result of the debate, the following resolution was agreed:

### *This Council*

- a) *affirms the historic commitment of the Baptist Union of Great Britain to*
  - *the full inclusion of women in all areas of leadership in church life,*
  - *the ordination and accreditation of women to ministry amongst us;*
  - *the service of women in all aspects of missionary work including the work of biblical and theological teaching and church leadership.*
- b) *celebrates the increasing number of women who are now exercising leadership within BUGB, both as ministers and in other capacities.*
- c) *recognises with concern the continuing struggle for full acceptance faced by many women in all areas of leadership, and in particular the difficulties many face in having their own call validated and in receiving a call from a church.*
- d) *calls upon the Faith and Unity Department and the Ministry Department to work with Associations, Colleges and churches to identify*
  - *steps already being taken to develop ministry in ways that are fully inclusive of women,*
  - *opportunities that currently exist for women fully to explore their sense of calling,*
  - *obstacles that prevent the acceptance of women for training, ministry, and all forms of wider leadership.*
- e) *commits to hearing further from the Faith and Unity Executive at its meeting in March 2011, and so to discern ways of addressing barriers to the full participation of women in all forms of leadership within BUGB.*

What follows is a brief account of what was presented and shared at that Council meeting.

### **Celebration – Viv O'Brien**

It is important that Council recalls our history and celebrates the steps that have been taken on the journey towards the full recognition of women's ministry and leadership amongst us. There have been many significant milestones.

*In 1966 the March Baptist Union Council endorsed the recommendation that 'In the judgment of the committee (appointed by Council) the theological basis of our faith does not warrant distinction between the sexes in the ministry of the church. The committee therefore recommends that the Council re-affirms the denomination's acceptance of women ministers and that it appeal to the churches to ask themselves how far in their practical attitude they are being true to the faith they profess.'*

Listed in the BUGB Directory at the time were three women ministers: Violet Hedger, Gwenyth Hubble and Marie Isaacs. There were also three probationers: Cynthia Allegro, Elizabeth Payne and Ruth Vinson.

There were 46 active deaconesses, four probationer deaconesses and three honorary deaconesses. If there were any female students in colleges, these were not listed. As far as it is possible to tell, there were no women Lay Pastors. The Superintendents Board was, of course, entirely male, and a photograph of Council from 1968 – two years later – shows that there were roughly 100 men present and nine women.

Twenty-two years later, in 1988, the figures for the number of women ministers had improved a little. There were now 70 women ministers listed in the Directory; included in this number were 16 former deaconesses who had been added to the ministerial role in 1975. These figures also included ministers who had retired, and 11 retired deaconesses. There was still no record of female Lay Pastors listed. Out of a total of 273 ministerial students in our colleges, 22 were female.

The Superintendent Board was still all male.

If we move on another twenty two years to 2010, the situation is very different. Women now number 12.5% of the Accredited List of BUGB ministers. Just over 20% of ministerial students are female, and there are 17 recognised women Lay Pastors. Council is looking more representational, and the Superintendent's Board, which gained its first woman in 1997, routinely has women present at what is now known as The National Settlement Team.

There is still much to learn from the past. In the long history of the BUGB Presidency going back over 150 years, there have been just three female Presidents: Mrs Nell Alexander (1978-79), the Revd Margaret Jarman (1987-88) and the Revd Dr Kate Coleman (2006-07). The Revd Dr Pat Took will be added to this number in 2011.

Committees play a vital and strategic role in the life of BUGB, and as a whole women have been woefully under-represented. Until 1980 the only committees that women chaired were the Baptist Women's League General Committee and the Deaconesses Committee. Things began to change in 1980 when Mrs Nell Alexander was appointed to chair the strategic General Purposes and Finance Committee, a position she held until 1982. From 1982 to 1986 Margaret Jarman chaired the Ministerial Recognition Committee, and from 1991 to 1997 Ruth Matthews was chair of the Ministry Main Committee (which became Ministry Executive in 1994). Since then a number of women have been appointed as moderators of Executive Committees: Ruth Bottoms (Faith and Unity, 1996-2000), Sian Murray-Williams (Faith and Unity, from 2006), Lynne Green (Mission, 1998-1999), Kathryn Morgan (Mission, 1999-2001), Sarah Parry (Ministry, 2009 onwards), Ruth Bottoms (Trustee Board, 2003 onwards).

Since 1998 there have been a number of significant appointments to celebrate:

- First female Superintendent (Pat Took) – 1998
- First female Deputy General Secretary (Myra Blyth) – 1999
- First female moderator of Council (Ruth Bottoms) – 2003
- First female College Principal (Anne Phillips) – 2009

Since the advent of Regional Ministry which replaced the Superintendency in 2001, BUGB now has two female Team Leaders (Pat Took and Dianne Tidball) out of a total of 13. Four other Regional Ministers are female out of a total of 22.

There is cause of celebration – even though there is still a long way to go!

## **Biblical and Theological Reflection – Pat Took and Simon Woodman**

The conversations at Baptist Union Council on the leadership and ministry of women have demonstrated that this is far wider than a biblical issue. However, it remains important that we engage with the Bible in a way which does justice to the broad sweep of biblical witness on the relationships between women and men. It is also important that we don't engage in 'proof texting', and that we keep the big picture in mind.

The creation story describes a universe created in love and harmony, with men and women having a creative partnership. It goes on to describe a series of alienations: God from humanity, woman from man, brother from brother. Fast-forward through to the ministry of Jesus, the cross and the resurrection and we see humanity restored in Christ, united with God and with one another in new creation. Paul also consistently presents this gospel of alienation overcome in the cross, and it is vital that his specific comments on women in leadership are read in the light of this gospel.

It is clear that Paul repeatedly affirmed the ministry of women, with twelve women being named as his co-workers in ministry. His programmatic statement of his grand vision for human equality is crucial here. Galatians 3.28 reads, 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.' In this verse we see Paul's conviction that the barriers of ethnicity, economic and social standing, and gender are overcome in Christ. It is clear that the churches Paul founded and pastored also caught something of this grand vision, and that the alienation between people was challenged in practice within those congregations.

But there were also clearly problems. Slaves taking authority over their masters and women speaking in public worship are a couple of examples of ways in which the practical outworking of Paul's grand vision caused cultural difficulty. So how did Paul the pastor respond to these complexities in his congregations? He did what many pastors do, and responded pragmatically to the practical problems before him. So, he asked some women to set aside their freedom for the sake of the public witness of the gospel of Christ, just as he asked some slaves to set aside their own freedom in Christ. But he doesn't lose sight of his grand vision either. He marries his injunction to women with the instruction that they should also be educated – a radical suggestion! Here we see Paul's short-term response, and also his long-term plan. In the short term, there are freedoms that must be set aside for the sake of the gospel. But in the long-term, the grand vision is still what he is aiming for.

In this, of course, Paul is asking nothing of those in his congregations that he has not already asked of himself. He who considered himself free in Christ also said that he had become a slave to all for the sake of the gospel. When asked whether it was permissible to eat food offered to idols, Paul replied that the freedom to eat the food should be set aside for the sake of the gospel.

When we read Paul on women, the important thing is to keep in mind his grand vision for human equality, and indeed the broad sweep of the biblical witness to a gospel of alienation overcome in Christ. The truth is we do not yet live in a world where all of those alienations, and the injustices and pains that result, have been overcome. We still need to be struggling for that new world of genuine belonging and partnership between women and men which is clearly the will both of Christ and of Paul. And as we do so, perhaps the time has come to challenge those who still perpetuate restrictions on the ministry of women to consider what freedoms they should set aside for the sake of the gospel.

## Stories

### ***Lynn Green – Minister and Team Leader, Wokingham Baptist Church***

Wokingham Baptist Church has a membership of nearly two hundred. I would describe my journey as a woman in leadership as overwhelmingly positive and I have found it humbling and inspiring when I think of all the people who have encouraged me and been 'for me' over the years.

I joined the church as a part-time associate minister when I left College. Having already been married for eight years by this time, my husband and I were hoping to start a family at some point but I felt that it was important to gain ministry experience first. After three years at Wokingham I was indeed pregnant with our first child.

When the serving Team Leader moved on to another pastorate, the church began to seek his replacement, assuming that it would be another male minister. As they conversed with various potential candidates, however, some members began to recognise that I had the gifting necessary to take the church forward. I recall people's reactions to the possibility of a woman Team Leader. The very suggestion of a female leader was highly challenging for some of the church members and touched on deep things about being a woman, motherhood and ministry. 'How would a part-time woman cope with the role?' they asked. 'How could a part-time woman possibly lead a team which would include a full-time man?' 'Could, or should, a woman lead a man?' These emotive questions were expressed by some at our church meetings but, in hindsight, much was left unspoken and lay under the surface. Despite lots of positive support from many, there remained a minority undercurrent even after I was appointed to the role.

Stuart and I have always wanted two children, but my second pregnancy took us all by surprise! We discovered I was pregnant just as the Church was at the point of calling me to lead the Staff Team; but the Church Meeting went ahead and appointed me anyway! My only regret, with hindsight, is that I curtailed my maternity leave, and returned after only four months. I increased my working hours to 70% of full-time when I became Team Leader, but it has always been vital for me to safeguard our family time. I am the only one who can be a wife to my husband and a mother to my children. I am fortunate that, with the support of the Church, I have normally been able to be there to pick the children up from school, and for our Saturday leisure activities.

Two months after I finally became Team Leader, my new full-time male colleague arrived. The Staff Team experienced considerable flux for a while, and the 'undercurrents' and resistance continued to rumble in the church. In the end a few people departed to other churches, but I have always realised that my gender was something that I could not do anything about! I worked at helping

the church community to recognise that differences of opinion might not be necessarily 'right or wrong'. We are called to love one another despite our differences. I continued to teach that, no matter what the cost, the community should be gracious and open. These were difficult months, but we all grew as a church, and I found that I was increasingly accepted as the Team Leader.

All this was a significant personal challenge, and at times I did suffer from loss of confidence. Becoming forty was a significant moment for me, and I made the most of my 'coming of age' amongst the church people! After eleven years ministry experience I was no longer the 'young lady assistant minister' who arrived straight from college!

There has been growth through these challenges. For myself, I have always believed that my ministry would stand for what it was if God was in it and so I have had to learn to trust God and be faithful along the way. I have also wanted to show that it is possible to do ministry differently and to open up people's imaginations to new possibilities! This requires a quiet determination when there is pressure to 'conform'. As a church we have become more mission-hearted, with an inclusive spirit. We have also become more relational. As Team Leader, I try to make sure that all the staff are involved and encouraged, whatever their role, be it minister, youth specialist, etc. Everyone has a voice. We work as a collaborative team, meeting and praying together, supporting each other's projects. The church has commended five people for ministry in recent years. I believe that we should trust people to use their gifts, and the Team supports church members in discipleship and mission, listening for the voice of the Spirit, as people are inspired to share their faith within the local community and beyond.

### ***Sarah Nutter – Church Secretary, Sion Baptist Church, Burnley***

My church is Sion Baptist Church in Burnley and is the only church I have ever regularly attended. I am the third generation of my family to take an active role in the leadership of Sion; my grandmother became one of the first 'lady' deacons in 1931. I was baptised and came into membership in 1996. In 1998 I was nominated and elected as a deacon during a period of interregnum. A couple of years later when our secretary needed to resign, I was persuaded to stand for the position, though I was very reluctant to take on the badge of 'secretary'. I knew that due to other commitments and the way the ministry and mission of the church was developing, I couldn't fulfil the traditional role. Instead the church adapted the role, resulting in two of us becoming church administrators. Along with support from others, this made a really effective team. I became a trustee of the church in 2000. In 2003 I was elected to represent the North West Baptist Association (NWBA) on Baptist Union Council and took my place on NWBA Council in 2004.



Until I was asked to tell my story, I had never considered what had made it possible for me, as a woman, to take a place in leadership in the church. I have never felt that my gender is an issue. It was easy for me to take on responsibilities at Sion, and I think the following factors may have contributed to this.

During the industrial revolution, Burnley was one of Lancashire's most prominent mill towns, becoming one of the world's largest producers of cotton cloth. Thousands of men and women worked alongside each other with the women also running the home and raising children. This created quite a matriarchal society, which is still evident today. The town's churches were founded at the centre of where people lived and worked together. They were not only places of worship and learning, but also provided social events and sports. This heritage, to some extent, is still with us. The congregation at Sion is still a very close community, made up of families of several generations, extended families, school friends, work colleagues, someone who knows someone who... and the church is still a centre for many social activities.

Our church is based on friendships and relationships and this I think is one reason why I have never ever heard or experienced any gender issues within our church. We respect one another as God's people, as equals. In the 1990s Sion had a female minister, which empowered women to take on leadership roles and made the rest of the congregation feel comfortable with this. But without a doubt, alongside the support of my family, the main factor has been the encouragement, the unfailing support and the constant affirmation I have received from our (male) minister, especially when I've said 'I can't do that' or 'I'm not clever enough to do that'. He recognised in me qualities that I certainly didn't know I had, and gave me the confidence to do all that I have!

### ***Rob Ellis – Principal, Regent's Park College, Oxford***

I am pleased to be able to reflect in my own experience of the ministry of women. This is not a biblical or theological reflection, though in terms of our understanding of the Holy Spirit we might say that this experience provides a framework or context for such matters.

In pastorate I have worked with two associates, one male and one female. They were very different people, different life experiences and personalities, different ministerial biographies. My female colleague and I often saw things differently. Mostly that was creative. How much of that was due to her (and my) gender? Little or none, I suspect! When we disagreed, which of us was right? Her, as often as me, I suspect! I do know that her gender enabled her to do some things with some people or groups that I could not have done, and vice-versa. We complemented one another well. Together we approximated more to the ministry of Christ than either of us could have done alone.

In my college work, much of this experience has been repeated. I think of two colleagues in particular; different people with different stories, with gender as a part of those stories, of course – how could it not be? But it never seemed to me to be the most decisive mark of the quality or the authenticity of ministry. That always came by grace and through Jesus Christ, and – as we know – in Christ there is neither male nor female.

For the last two and a half years I have sat under the ministry of a sole woman pastor in the church where I attend worship whenever possible. Her preaching and conduct of worship are refreshing, thought provoking, and revelatory. Is that because she is a woman? I doubt it. Her pastoral care been much appreciated – expressed in such down to earth ways as walking our dog when I am at Baptist Union Council! I wish I could clone Kathryn and distribute her around the country. She is a wonderful minister. How could our denomination and the Kingdom not be enriched by her ministry among us?

This Council debate makes me look back and thank God for women in ministry. And it helps me identify something I have not always been able to put my finger on – a sense of real perplexity that this should even be a question. We're a funny lot! And God works in mysterious ways. Even – to dare to hope –through men like me as well as through the women whose ministry I have been fortunate enough to share and experience.

### ***Anne Carter – Minister, West Swindon Ecumenical Partnership***

I was once adamantly against women in ministry! I was brought up in a Brethren Church, where I was surrounded by men who held significant roles in the church, and women who did very little, except for wearing hats, pouring the tea and teaching the children. When I grew too old for the Sunday school, at the tender age of eleven (in the days before Child Protection legislation), I was immediately catapulted into teaching a class of seven year-old children on my own, every week.

When I was married, I became a member of a Baptist church, and encountered women deacons for the first time. They did not lead worship as the men did, however. Over time, there was a gradual shift in the culture, and women became more visible in church life. Then, one day, a young woman declared that she felt 'Called' to the Baptist ministry, which caused a major crisis.

The church was initially deeply concerned by this request, since many did not see this as a role that was open to women. Our minister wisely invited the Revd David Richardson to come and lead three Bible studies on 'Women in the Church'.

David explained that his agenda was not to tell us 'what to think', but to explain how he understood the scriptures and leave us to decide for ourselves what each of us believed. As he explored the scriptures, especially some of Paul's letters,

he showed a different perspective. That some women had been leaders in the early church, that the church had long ago changed its thinking about slavery as culture and so, maybe, there was the possibility of rethinking our views about women in ministry as well. This experience was an absolute revelation to me. At some levels it excited me, but at the same time I wondered how much more of scripture I might have misinterpreted. I did not know what to think. I felt shaken to the core of my being.

I was fortunate to have a wise friend, whose own journey into ministry had temporarily distanced our relationship. Now the Revd Vivienne O'Brien, she understood my dilemma and supported me whilst I struggled to regain the solid ground of my faith. I gradually came to recognise the truth of what Viv and David had taught me. For a while I continued to work as a voluntary counsellor, and then one day I was attracted by an advertisement for a 'Pastoral Support Worker' at Purley Baptist Church. My qualifications closely matched the job spec, but when I received the application form, I discovered that the title of the job was actually 'Associate Minister'. That shook me too, but I applied. I was told that I was a strong candidate, but the person they had finally selected was additionally theologically trained. The interviewing panel encouraged me to explore the possibility of formal training!

I visited two colleges. At the first college, I was told not to expect to enter paid ministry, because I was married and my husband earned well! (This was ten years ago, and I trust it would never happen today.) I went to the other one.

I enjoyed my time at Regent's Park College. I discovered that there was a shortage of suitable openings for students and I took up my first placement thankfully. Much later, I was told that this church had been "expected to close before Christmas"! The church grew, however, and at the end of my course, the members called me to be their minister. I worked with them for six years. Today I am very happily settled, ministering in a Local Ecumenical Partnership, with responsibility for two churches in the group.

### ***Experiencing the Pain – Anne Phillips<sup>19</sup>***

So far Baptist Union Council has heard facts about our Baptist story, engaged with some of the biblical questions, and discovered the difference women make to doing church. But that is not the whole story. Many sitting in Council and elsewhere will be thinking, 'there's more to tell. This is all very rational, very measured, but where's my story and where's my pain?' We must hear some of the stories it is too costly for women to share on a public platform, and put ourselves in the place of the women whose truth we tell.

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<sup>19</sup> Prior to her retirement, Anne Phillips was Co-Principal of the Northern Baptist Learning Community and led the group that prepared the Council debate.

I want to begin, though, by telling you a story of my own. Many years ago when I was a new mother, I plucked up the courage – and it took courage – to go to my doctor. I sat in his surgery describing my feelings. I wasn't just a young mother, I was a highly qualified professional woman. If I want to play that particular game I would call myself a high flyer in the educational world. Before I'd even finished talking, he looked up and said, 'Oh, come on, you're exaggerating!' I was in new and for me uncharted territory; I needed help to negotiate what was happening to me. Instead I got denial of its reality.

I felt then just like my women colleagues who have trusted themselves to someone in a position to help. They have named what they sensed of God's call on them, only to be slapped back and their truth rubbished. On my own path to ministry I haven't suffered their overt rejection. I have 'only' experienced the subtle and insidious sexism of Baptist life, the tokenism, the exclusive language, the 'fear' of clever women, the uniform modelling of male leadership styles, the monotony of male perspectives through speakers and preachers, and the personal comments about dress, hair, and body parts.

In those moments in the doctor's surgery, I began to doubt myself. Perhaps he did know better? I felt humiliated and ashamed, and my self-confidence drained away. I should have exploded with anger but I was alone and vulnerable: he was a man – the professional with the power. There are few of us, men or women, who have not at some time experienced something similar at the hands of those with power, whether consultants or teachers or even parents. That should allow us all to identify with the stories from women called into the service of God and the church.

Here are comments made to women and experiences encountered by women at three stages on the path of leadership:

### *In the beginning...*

- 'When I felt called to ministry, I consulted my minister, and he laughed.'
- 'If you go into ministry, don't expect to be paid, because you're married, and your husband earns well.'
- 'If men aren't heeding the call, God sometimes has to make do with second best' (used about women going overseas as missionaries).

### *In training...*

- 'You know our church normally pays the college fees for students, but you have a husband, so we won't support you.'
- 'I was happy for women to train for ministry provided they were not thinking of becoming senior pastors' (said by someone, now a Regional Minister, who publicly admits his view was mistaken).

- ‘Why are you here? Why are you taking a college place away from a man of God?’ (said by a man, arms akimbo, who was blocking a student’s way into a lecture room).

*In ministry...*

- ‘We can’t ask her to lead a church weekend. She’ll need to be at home with her husband and children.’
- ‘Make sure you don’t preach when you’re menstruating!’
- ‘We can’t put you onto our preaching rota very often; we’ve so many retired ministers (men of course) and they must come first.’

Reflect, too, on the minister whose name went to a church in pastoral vacancy and received in response a letter from one of the deacons full of vile abuse towards a woman he’d never even met. And the young minister, sporty and fit, who was given a pair of scales by a church member who thought she was putting on weight. Such instances are not isolated.

With each such comment spoken and heard, a light goes out in a woman’s heart and soul, which it takes courage and determination to re-ignite. Sometimes it snuffs it out for ever.

Here are two longer stories that bring out the hurt and pain that is experienced. Catriona Gordon, now the first woman minister in sole pastoral charge of a church in Scotland, says this:

*These discriminatory experiences were immensely painful and I was very close to giving up. I was really saddened, particularly because outside of the church I had held equal responsibility with men and had been respected and affirmed for my abilities as a professional engineer working in risk assessment for hazardous industries. By now, I had first class honours degrees in both engineering and theology, and was passionate about fulfilling my call to work with a local church in their mission for the Kingdom of God but it seemed that no one was going to allow me to do so.*

*I live with the knowledge that my previous professional success as an engineer and my hard won academic qualifications are often considered to be a disadvantage for my suitability in a church. It is apparently not considered quite right for a woman minister to be confident about her professional or academic skills but, ironically, this life-experience would have been admired in a man who was answering the call into the Baptist ordained ministry, to lead and to teach God’s people.*

*It would be easy to dwell on the negatives – and they absolutely must be heard and challenged – but there are glimpses of God’s redeeming grace at work. I hope in allowing my story to be told that other women called by God to ordained*

*Baptist ministry will experience more of the grace and less of the grot than, so far, I have.*

Mary Cotes serves as Ecumenical Moderator in Milton Keynes. She says:

*I realised that I was the only woman in the room, and unlike others, I was not wearing a dog collar. Before the meeting properly began, we stood around drinking coffee. I found myself standing next to the Chair. He suggested that we take the opportunity to introduce ourselves, going round the circle, and explaining our roles. When it came to my opportunity to speak, the Chair put his arm around me, saying, "Hello, dear. You must be the undergraduate representative!" I replied, "No, I am the Reverend Doctor Mary Cotes." He winked, and said, "Well, aren't you a clever girl, then!"*

*I do wonder how old a woman has to be before she is called a woman.*

Many in Baptist churches pay little heed to our Baptist deliberations in Council and Assembly, but there are timely allies who may command a more authoritative hearing. In addition to Mainstream North's 'Blackley Declaration', an article by Michelle Guinness entitled 'The Stained Glass Ceiling' (Christianity, March 2010), written about women's leadership from its evangelical perspective, calls upon many witnesses from organisations such as Spring Harvest and Soul Survivor to analyse the barriers and to support the struggle for women's leadership. These witnesses include Ian Coffey from among our Baptist family, as another convert to the cause.

I am constantly amazed at the audacity of women and men who oppose the work God has so evidently blessed over many centuries, and how adherence to a handful of verses can override the overwhelming sense of scripture and of theology which not just recognises but expects women and men to share together as equal partners in all God's saving work. It is worth recalling two passages from scripture which tell of the imperative to speak God's word and do God's work which, when God calls, no human opposition can defeat whatever the suffering of the word-bearer – not least because these have helped me to endure in the face of doubts engendered by male dominance.

Whether Amos was a humble shepherd or a wealthy landowner, he wasn't one of the religious elite. Neither priest nor prophet, he was abused and reviled when he stood up in the market place to proclaim God's word, but he could do no other because, he says, 'The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken; who can but prophesy?' (Amos 3:8)

Likewise, when Peter and the apostles testified against their Jewish persecutors that 'we must obey God rather than any human authority', Gamaliel's wisdom prevailed so that they were only flogged and ordered to shut up before being

released. For Gamaliel had reflected on history, and saw the bigger picture. 'If this plan or this undertaking', he said, 'is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them – in that case you may even be found fighting against God!'

Baptist Union Council affirmed women's God-inspired ministries forty four years ago, yet today there are still barriers which deprive God's church of the gift of women's leadership which brings welcome change and rich blessing. Now we need not only to reaffirm that resolve, but also address the barriers to women's full acceptance in every part of our common life.

### **Concluding Summary – Graham Sparkes<sup>20</sup>**

Baptist Union Council has talked and reflected together, both in groups and in plenary, and in many ways it has been a sobering experience. It is clear that we should not underestimate the hurt and pain that has been, and continues to be, the experience of women in our midst. It is as deep as the underlying discrimination and marginalisation that exists. It is the reality.

It is also clear that within Council the deep hope has been expressed that our debate and the passing of the resolution with such overwhelming support will mark a turning point. We must make sure that it is so.

People have talked about being on a journey. In many ways it is a helpful image but, as one group said, it cannot be a journey without a destination. It cannot be one where we never get out of the front door, and even when we do so, we only walk slowly round the garden a few times. Forty four years ago this Council passed a resolution affirming the ministry of women amongst us. Forty four years later, still women are being talked to in ways that are unacceptable, their calling to ministry being dismissed and their gifting for leadership being despised and rejected. That is not being on a journey! That is stagnation. Or worse – it is hypocrisy! That is saying one thing and doing something else, and that is unacceptable amongst gospel people.

This meeting of Council, together with the resolution that has been passed, must be a cairn on the journey, a marker in the sand, a staging post that sends us into a new future. A future where we have learned to be more fully sisters and brothers in Christ, valuing and affirming all the gifts each of us brings, for the glory of God and God's kingdom.

Dissent was one of the major issues that the groups were asked to talk about.

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<sup>20</sup> At the time of writing, Graham Sparkes was Head of the Faith and Unity Department with responsibility for issues of inclusion and diversity. He is now President of Luther King House, Manchester.

What of churches and ministers who dissent from our resolution affirming the ministry and leadership of women?

Last November the Faith and Unity Department brought a document to Baptist Union Council that was welcomed and affirmed entitled 'Knowing What We Believe'. It was about how we express our theological convictions as Baptist Christians who are part of a covenanted community. It said that we as Council should be unafraid to speak with clarity and conviction on issues, declaring what we as Baptists believe – as we have indeed done in our resolution on women in leadership. It also said that there must be liberty for local churches and individuals to dissent, and so it would not be the intention that any church would be asked to leave BUGB because it held to different views on such matters as we are discussing,

But we as Council have said we will not hold back from stating our gospel convictions and any who do dissent need to hear and recognise what it is that we as a covenanted community are most deeply committed to. Commitment to the full inclusion of women in leadership is our 'norm'. It is our deepest conviction as Baptists. We have said so! Those who disagree and want to be part of the family have to reckon with that.

There is a place for dissent. We are part of a dissenting tradition – and proud of it. But to dissent as a Baptist is to speak up for justice at great personal cost; it is not to perpetuate injustice at great cost to others. In other words, we should not allow dissent to be a cover for prejudice and discrimination that inflicts pain and hurt on the women amongst us.

We have passed our resolution. With sober realism we now have to work at living it. It is the responsibility of all of us to take it forward into the life and structures of BUGB.



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