

Discerning common themes: Theological reflection report for Group 1

Introduction

Where does this report fit into the findings of Project Violet?

During Project Violet we have focused on three layers of Baptist life where change is needed if all women are to flourish in ministry:

1. The everyday language and behaviour we use in church life
2. The accepted ways of doing things
3. What we believe about the church and the role of ministers

The Requests for Change cover all three of these levels. However, we also wanted to share the theological ideas that we came to recognise as significant in our work together. This is the first of four theological reflection reports emerging from the work of the four groups of women co-researchers in Project Violet.

What kind of theology?

We are offering a theology of discernment, by which we mean that this is theology that arose from listening to God and to each other, drawing on Baptist ways of believing, our love of scripture, and enfolded in prayer.

We brought all that we are to these conversations of discernment - our minds, bodies, souls, and emotions - as we listened deeply to what God was saying. This report arises from a process of reflection which enabled us to listen to God and each other over a number of months.

As each group worked on their research they met to reflect upon the words of the 50 women who had written about the joys and sorrows of ministry during the MOSAIC phase of the project. Seeing their research questions reflected in these women's stories assured them that they were not alone.

As each co-researcher finished her research she reflected on what she had learned as she prepared her report.

Each group of co-researchers then met with Jane Day and Helen Cameron to reflect on their reports. Following this, their reports were read by a group of three women from our colleges who then also met as theological reflectors to begin a process of discernment on what they had read. Finally there was a joint meeting where the learning from the reflective conversations was shared and further listening, prayer, and discernment took place. This report tries to capture what was learned through that process of reflection and discernment.

This may be different from your previous experience of doing theology. Often the focus of our theological tradition has been the prioritising of making logical and convincing arguments. Perhaps that was your experience as a student. Here, however, we have sought to value the process of conversation and the experience and understanding of each co-researcher. This is reflected in the way in which each report contains more than one voice and represents more than one context, identity, and type of ministry. It is designed to start a conversation rather than be the last word.

If you would like to learn more we suggest listening to Helen Dare's interview in the Project Violet Podcast Season 2 on the Project Violet website, or released on 4 May 2024 on Podbean: <https://projectvioletpodcast.podbean.com/>

Some suggestions as you read...

Try to read this report as an invitation from another Baptist to join in a conversation rather than as an agenda paper for a meeting.

As we have read each other's work we have had these virtues in mind:

- Humility and the readiness to get it wrong
- Being confident in truth-telling and truth-seeking
- The love of the other's voice and ideas
- Owning the expertise of experience
- Living with complexity whilst seeking clarity

We have included a question following each theme of the report to stimulate reflection and discussion.

We encourage you to ask:

- How does this report resonate with your understanding of what it is to be a Baptist?
- What echoes are you hearing of scripture and the theology you are familiar with?
- What are the conversations you feel prompted to have?

Reports and co-researchers in Group 1

You will find the five reports from Group 1 on the Project Violet website:

1. What is the difference that MagnifyYou has made to the women who took part and why was it needed? - Beth Powney
2. Marital status and ministry - Carol Bostridge
3. What does affirming women leaders in our Association look like? - Clare Hooper
4. Enabling women to prepare for ministerial training so they engage and flourish as Ministers-in-Training - Helen Stokley
5. Reflecting on being a millennial leader within Baptists Together - Hayley Young
(please note this is a film rather than a written report)

Themes and issues

Walking together as Baptists

We want to affirm the Marks of Ministry when they say:

Ministry means being accountable to others through:

- Intentional accountability to develop as a disciple of Christ and as a Baptist minister
- Engaging in peer support, watching over, and walking with one another
- Committed to continuing ministerial development and training
- Accountable to the local church
- Accountable to and supportive of the wider Baptist family
- Providing oversight and accountability for others

Reflecting upon what we had learned from our research we dared to envisage different ways of walking together as Baptists. We spoke of walking side by side rather than arguing head-to-head. Of conversations fuelled by curiosity about the other's perspective rather than a need to correct. Of spaces of mutual affirmation and respectful challenge. We

looked at the conversational practices of Jesus - who came alongside people, asked challenging questions with compassion, and told stories that invited a response.

A question for you to consider:

For you, what has this 'walking together' been at its best?

The Suffering Servant as a model for leadership

In reading each other's research we were overwhelmed at times by the pain and suffering that had been shared. We turned to the account of the Suffering Servant found in Isaiah 42:1-4 and saw a model of leadership that represented others to God, sought to live an exemplary life, was uncompromising in the search for justice, and was persistent rather than insistent. In seeking justice for women ministers, we welcomed as allies those men who have told us that they too would like things to be different. We repented of the fact that we too have sometimes been complicit in ways of working that need to be changed - for example, in our participation in the discernment of calls to ministry or the settlement process.

A question for you to consider:

What examples of leadership are you inspired by?

Moderating the translocal space

The space in which Baptists associate is holy ground on which we live out our covenant to God and each other. Baptists value freedom to hold different views and to express those views. That means that the way in which meetings, conferences, and gatherings beyond the local church are moderated is particularly important. (These spaces are what are called the translocal space.) For that freedom to be exercised responsibly there needs to be a respect for the role of moderator or chair and a willingness to reflect on *how* we make our point as well as what point we make. Moderators have a responsibility to ensure good order but also to ensure all voices are heard and to challenge language and behaviour that is discriminatory. For the women in Group 1 there is a desire that moderation explicitly includes the responsibility to challenge sexist language and behaviour irrespective of the intentions of the speaker. Acknowledging the inappropriate use of a stereotype in the moment can open up a conversation rather than shut down women's contribution.

A question for you to consider:

How do you see this covenant being lived out in the translocal spaces you are part of - for example, Association gatherings or ministers' meetings?

Bringing our theology of ministry and our theology of family life into conversation with each other

Women minister in local churches that have invited them. They candidate for ministry in a variety of local settings within a Union that affirms the ministry of women. The value of women in the settlement process and ongoing ministry can be undermined when they sense an implicit theology of family life which has not been stated but leaks out in questions and comments. Examples of this implicit theology include:

- That women are responsible for household management and that their husbands assist rather than take responsibility for household tasks
- That women are the primary care-givers for children and adult relatives and so should defer or set aside a call to ministry until after those tasks have been discharged
- That women are economically dependent upon men as so should defer to the needs of their husband's career

- That single women have no family life and so are always available

Some of this implicit theology has not been discussed in the church meeting and so surfaces in expectations that feel like the imposition of stereotypes. They can be undermining for men who manage household tasks, provide care, and share financial responsibility. Baptist churches value family life and so we would encourage a deeper reflection on what God calls us to be and do as a family and household.

A question for you to consider:

What model of family life do you bring into church life?

Our invitation to you

Now you have read this report we invite you to ask:

- How does this report resonate with your understanding of what it is to be a Baptist?
- What echoes are you hearing of scripture and the theology you are familiar with?
- What are the conversations you feel prompted to have?
- Who could help you explore these issues further?