

Discerning Common Themes: Theological Reflection Report for Group 2

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 2

1. Women's experience of pioneering contexts - Alexandra Elish and Carmel Murphy Elliot
2. Reflections on developing a London Baptist Women's Justice Hub - Claire Nicolls
3. Is it easier for female Baptist ministers to flourish as Chaplains in the NHS than in local Baptist churches and translocal Baptist life? - Sarah Crane

Themes and issues

What does flourishing in ministry look like?

Flourishing ministry was described both as 'freedom from' and 'freedom to'. 'Freedom from' meant being free from expectations that there was only one right way to minister. The image was discussed of David being given armour by Saul and being weighed down by it, when he needed to fight Goliath in his own way. Another image was a woman entering college and feeling that to fit in she needed to buy a brief case, but in the end deciding to buy a green one to express her identity. Sadly, some women ministers had only felt that freedom when they ministered in places other than the local church.

'Freedom to' meant working in collaborative and creative ways where people learn together rather than positioning the minister as the expert. It meant knowing colleagues had your back when things didn't work as planned. It meant working within a network of support rather than going it alone. To echo the Marks of Ministry: 'watching over one another and walking together'. They had experienced a default expectation of independence whereas they were seeking inter-dependence.

A question for you to consider:

How would you define flourishing in ministry?

How do Baptists understand ministry beyond the local church?

Baptists root the discernment of a calling to ministry in the local church. Not all local churches have had experience of ministry beyond the local church, such as pioneering and chaplaincy. This can make the discernment journey more difficult for those who feel called to those forms of ministry. By recognising these forms of ministry Baptists endorse the work of the church in the life of the world. In addition they affirm those ministers who work as guests in the work and social spaces of others, rather than as host who invite people into the church. A practical outworking of that theology is ensuring that those who minister beyond the local church are drawn into the covenant relationships between ministers - for example, by taking part in ministers' conferences.

A question for you to consider:

What did you learn the last time you listened to a chaplain or pioneer talk about their ministry? How could that learning be taken into the local church?

How do we discuss complementarian theologies in the translocal space?

In Baptist life, local churches are free to interpret scripture and adopt practices that flow from that interpretation. In practice this means that some local churches adopt a complementarian theology, meaning that they see men and women having different social roles and place some restrictions on the ministry roles women can undertake. For some churches this will mean not accepting women as accredited ministers, in others it will mean that women accredited ministers need to work under the supervision of men. Churches that do not place any restrictions on the ministry roles of women are seen as having an egalitarian theology.

The freedom to interpret scripture can lead to tensions in those spaces where ministers associate with one another. Women can find it difficult to enter those spaces if their legitimacy as a minister is challenged by colleagues with a complementarian theology. A commitment to sitting together and disagreeing well is needed together with a recognition that the acceptance of women's ministry by the Baptist Union means that women are expected to be able to participate fully in translocal spaces. When this expectation is undermined, it is helpful when men play their part in challenging this, rather than women having to assert it.

A question for you to consider:

Can you think of an example where you have seen people disagreeing well? What did that look like?

What do I think before I speak?

Talking together is how Baptists get things done. All aspects of church life are discussed in meetings which aim to have all relevant groups represented.

Women ministers described sometimes feeling inhibited or hesitant when speaking in the translocal space. They described this behaviour as 'self-editing' - looking through what they plan to say and trying to guess how it will be received and then editing it accordingly before they say anything. The kind of questions they asked themselves included, 'Is it only me thinking this?' and 'Am I being unreasonable in asking for this?' They had experienced being ready to speak but then finding that the conversation had moved on. They had received feedback from male colleagues that they were hesitant or lacked confidence.

However, they could see how self-editing could be positive - for example, when people processed negative emotions before articulating them. Or, when people took time to be

aware of the advantages or privileges they might bring to the conversation and held back, allowing others to contribute first.

The burden of gratitude to male mentors and not wanting to challenge men who were supportive could mean overlooking sexism - which brought up the image of sitting obediently under the table, not making a fuss and being grateful for the scraps of acknowledgement that came their way (Mark 7:24-30).

A question for you to consider:

What do you notice about your own 'self-editing' behaviour? What do you do to notice who is and is not contributing to the conversation?

Our invitation

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

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