

Reflections on Developing a London Baptists Women's Justice Hub

In summer 2021 I was asked to be part of the newly formed London Baptists (LB) Justice Hub, leading on Gender Justice. The structure of the hub was to mirror the national justice structure with focus on Racial Justice, Gender Justice and Disability Justice, with other justice issues to join later. I joined the moderator of the hub, representatives for racial and disability justice, two representatives from CYF in London and the RM as part of the group. The LB Justice Hub was formed to raise issues of justice and facilitate relationship building in association life, to link with wider Baptist and ecumenical colleagues who are working on justice and to equip LB churches in holistic mission. As the lead on Gender Justice, I was both part of the central LB justice hub and tasked with setting up a subgroup focussed particularly on issues of women's justice. Rather than jump straight into active work, I began by listening to what was happening already and to the voices of women I encountered to ensure that as the group was formed, we would understand what our role would be.

The formation of the Women's Justice subgroup came about through networking. I had had a number of conversations with women in ministry that had brought up some challenges that those women faced as they had walked on the pathway to and beyond Baptist accreditation. The group includes Ministers in Training (MITs), Newly Accredited and Fully Accredited Ministers (NAMS and FAMS) as well as (a later addition) one of the Regional Ministers (RMs), who was keen to get more involved as issues of gender justice were coming to the fore within the association. I had a conversation with each member before they agreed to be part of the group and shared some of my own story with them as well as listening to their stories. The nature of my own connections and those within the group means that we are not representative of the whole of LB and come from a small area within. It is, I believe, a challenge of how the Baptist world works, where it is often about who you know and who they know. I also had a conversation with a member of the national gender justice group who did not have the capacity to be involved and with others who have done work on women's justice issues within the association and union. The group are all women ministers. Whilst we have discussed having men as part of the group and lay people, we have not appointed any yet.

The issue of language

It became clear early on in the formation of the group that language was an issue, the word 'gender' carrying too much baggage. In my role I was asked to speak at a NAMS day on Gender Justice, and the immediate response from a member of my discussion group was that he was looking forward to thinking through issues of gender and sexuality. When asking someone to be part of the Justice Hub subgroup, they began to tell me of issues they were having in their church of someone who was exploring their gender identity. There has also been some questioning of language use in online BU events and that has distracted from the message being put across. We were asked to use the word 'gender' because that's what the national hub uses, but we wanted to ensure that the focus of our work was clear and so we (with the agreement of the association) changed the name to 'Women's Justice'. This is in line with HEBA, who have gone through the same conversations. When conversations about women's issues are mixed up with conversations about gender and sexuality, then this blurs and distracts from the issues that women still face in our Baptist family. The World Health Organisation (2023) defines gender as the "characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed..... gender varies from society to society and changes over time". Meaning is worked out in context, and with the changing definition and confusion over the use of 'gender' as a descriptive word, changing to 'women' has focussed our work and made our purpose clearer.

Choosing a focus

The group had all come across the statistics that Jane Day presented at the beginning of 2021 on the number of women ministers in Baptists Together and their places in association and national life as part of her reflections as BU Centenary Enabler. What was particularly concerning to the group was the statistics on MITs and NAMS which were much lower in LB than in national life (28% LB to 34% national NAMS and 13% LB to 47% national MITs). Due to this information, and our own experiences as women in ministry in London, we agreed to first focus on issues to do with women in leadership and ministry, encouraging women in LB churches in flourishing as leaders and in considering accredited ministry (our purpose statement is at the end of this reflection). As a group we felt that these statistics showed that although things are changing, there is still work to be done. This is echoed not just within church life, but further afield too. In 'Women in Leadership', focussing on women in politics, Gillard & Okonjo-Iweala (2021, 26) write:

“So slow is the pace of change that not only will we achieve gender equality in our lifetimes, it will likely not be realised in the lifetimes of children who are born today. Our choice is between having the world crawl towards the dawn of political gender equality in the year 2115, or acting dramatically now. While fast change will undoubtedly be difficult to achieve, to simply wait would be intolerable. We hope you share our mindset of fixed determination coupled with extreme impatience. Let’s get this done”.

The question of whether this focus is still important today, as the number of women ministers is higher than it has ever been and women are having more opportunities in association life came up in our conversations with church leaders and ministers outside the group. Although the justice hub was supported by a regional minister, it appeared that the other RMs were not so much on board, but through conversation and circumstances that has begun to change.

One key change has come with the conversations around changing the ministerial rules to allow ministers to be in a same sex marriage within Baptists Together. There has been a noticeable rise in conservative theology being more at the forefront of conversations, and this inevitably has led to conversations about women in ministry. In some places it has led to an emphasis on complementarian theology which raises questions about the roles women take in ministry.

“Ideas matter. These evangelical beliefs – why they argue for the immutability of female submission – are rooted in how they interpret Paul. The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood may start with Genesis 2 in their overview of complementarianism, but their reading of this creation narrative stems from 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Timothy 2. Paul frames every aspect of complementarian teachings. Evangelicals read Pauline texts as designating permanent and divinely ordained role distinctions between sexes. Men wield authority that women cannot..... Men lead, women follow. Paul tells us so.” (Allison Barr, 2021, 40)

Whilst the discussion on roles of women and men in leadership are different to the same sex marriage debate, and many of those who are against changing the ministerial rules are affirming of women in ministry, the proximity of the arguments has given rise to the language of complementarianism in some instances. Scripture is described as teaching biblical male headship within marriage and the church, whilst maintaining the equal dignity of both men and women before God. This is challenging for women in ministry, as it questions their status as senior or sole leaders in a church context.

“Patriarchy by any other name is still patriarchy. Complementarians may argue that women are equal to men, as does the Southern Baptist Convention’s 1998 amendment to the “Baptist Faith and Message”. “The husband and wife are of equal worth before God, since both are created in God’s image”. Yet their insistence that “equal worth” manifests in unequal roles refutes this” (Allison Barr, 2021, 18)

Whilst these conversations are continuing it is more important than ever that the role of women in leadership stays on the agenda of our union, association and churches. The language of headship in marriage and the church has been more noticeable, and discussions have raised questions for women in ministry - particularly single women in ministry. Whilst patriarchal views and language has been challenged, and some rethinking around the ways views are expressed has been done, this is an ongoing issue.

One of the questions the Women’s Justice subgroup has been asking, is how this language and these assertions affect us personally and how it affects the doors that are open to women in ministry, particularly in those churches that are cared for by the writers of the articles. How might we be able to, as a group, begin to open the doors that have been shut because of the barriers this kind of language puts up to women in LB churches? The recent conversations in the Church of England over the appointment of the Bishop of Blackburn (Tomlinson, 2023), who is not affirming of women’s ordination, have been a helpful insight into how the views of an authority figure can affect the wider culture and those who seek to thrive within it and despite it. Whilst Baptist trans local leaders do not have the authority of a Bishop, they are still an authority figure, and their words and actions matter. If a trans local minister were to express publicly complementarian views or were simply known to not be fully affirming of women in ministry, does this put up barriers to women thriving in ministry?

How does all of this affect women in ministry in London? The Regional Team have reacted to these challenges in a mostly positive way and are committed, on the whole, to ensuring that there is a wide spectrum of theology within those who lead the association who are understanding of different viewpoints. They have been particularly active in ensuring that women are involved in association life and their voices represented. One of the challenges of women’s justice in comparison to say racial or disability justice, is that within Baptists Together it is acceptable to have both churches that are not affirming of women in ministry and those who are. Accredited women ministers have learnt to sit

in this tension, but it does not mean that it is not hard sometimes. Part of our role as a Women's Justice group is to make space to acknowledge that and walk together with women in that.

The Church of England appoints Diocesan advisers in women's ministry (DAWMs). Brouard's (2021) paper reflects on their role and whether they are necessary. They act as advocates and help to take down barriers, acting as a soundboard when things go wrong, aiming to ensure that women clergy can reach their full potential. She talks about how when we take our eye off the ball, that that is when women begin to be marginalised again, her conclusion stating the words of one of the participants in her research:

"So if people challenge me about the role I can say: "When men and women are treated exactly the same, then there may no longer be a need, but while they're not, there needs to be somebody, who embodies, that's a good word, embodying the diocese's commitment that women clergy flourish"

The LB Justice Hub, and Women's Justice as part of that, speaks about the association's commitment to ensuring that those who are marginalised can flourish, and, so therefore, the need for this work, whilst it can be seen to be beating an old drum at times, is necessary. The advocacy role of the DWAMs might be something that the Women's Justice subgroup could mirror within LB as women in leadership continue to face challenges because of their gender.

Seeking Answers and moving forward

The Women's Justice subgroup have all been, and continue to be part of the listening process, and our first two meetings involved sharing some of the things we had experienced, seen and heard as women ministers in the association. This raised questions which led to conversations with key people in the association. Much of this overlaps with other Project Violet Research, which is only natural as the Women's Justice subgroup has a broad scope, and we are encouraged by the way that association life is already changing as a consequence of the conversations that are going on. The questions that we have raised include:

- What are women's experiences of settlement?
- How does culture impact on women in ministry?
- What are women's experiences of being in college?
- How can we celebrate and encourage women in ministry?
- How can we encourage others to walk this path?
- Where are the role models and mentors?

In Michele Mahon's paper on the experiences of Black Women ministers in LB she gives some recommendations which resonate with the questions we are asking. Six years later, her research is as appropriate to all Women Baptist ministers as it is to Black women ministers, and perhaps part of the role of the Women's Justice subgroup is to implement some of her recommendations on a wider scale (as well as working in collaboration with the Racial Justice subgroup in implementing some of her recommendations for Black women in particular). The issues she highlights have not gone away and she recommends that:

- LB makes space for gatherings of women ministers to share stories and experience
- LB repents for when the association has not recognised or listened to the voice of the marginalised within
- That theological training becomes more accessible.
- That mentors and role models are trained and actively sought out in advance of need
- That local congregations are offered theological reflection of the role of women in the church
- That women, and particularly black women are platformed within the association

One of the challenges in issues of justice is that if nobody speaks out, then the injustices are not seen to be a problem. That is what lies behind the 'why are we still talking about women in ministry?' question and why we are not much further on six years after the publication of Mahon's paper.

Another question we need to address is how the LB Women's Justice subgroup fits in with the wider BU picture. At the time of writing there are three members of the National Gender Justice Hub from LB but none of them are part of the LB Women's Justice subgroup (in fact two of them are involved in racial justice). On a national scale we need to do some work on how the regional hubs work with and connect with the national picture. Could the National Hub be better served if the representatives working on justice in the associations are the ones who are meeting with others from across the country? This would also benefit the associations and help enable them to learn off one another.

What next?

After a year of meeting, listening and asking questions, the LB Women's Justice Group is ready to fully launch. One of the issues we have encountered is that LB Justice Hub has not really got off the ground, and so there has not been any momentum behind the work we have been doing. This has changed since we got a RM fully on board and committed to our work on Women's Justice in Summer 2022, and will change further as a new RM appointment includes leading the association on justice.

As we launch the LB Women's Justice Group with an event in summer 2023, we are putting Women in Leadership firmly on the LB agenda. This day will give space for women leaders to gather, celebrate, tell their stories and be encouraged to thrive in leadership. We hope that it will encourage more women to explore accredited ministry when the possibility has not been open to them before and that through this networking that we might be able to begin to raise up new mentors and role models in our churches.

Whilst there have been many stumbling blocks on this journey, and there continue to be conversations happening around issues of women's justice, it is encouraging to see that change is already happening within London Baptists.

Recommendations

The work of the LB Women's Justice subgroup is ongoing and we will continue to bring recommendations to the association and beyond. There are some issues that this reflection on the early stages of the group raises that it would be helpful to address:

1. Language

The continued conversation over the meaning of 'gender' and the assumptions behind the meaning as it is worked out in context distracts from the work we are doing to support and enable women in leadership and to challenge patriarchy and sexism within Baptists Together. Some work on a theological understanding of 'gender' and 'women' would be helpful, and as a consequence, a unity in language use across Baptists Together.

2. Complementarianism and Headship

- a) Some reflection and theological thinking on how complementarian views affect Baptist life and values, particularly in regards to women in leadership, and some work on how much of this comes from institutionalised and historical patriarchy and sexism rather than theology, whilst recognising that we can hold both complementarian and egalitarian views within the union and still work together.
- b) Nationally and within local associations, some reflection and theological thinking on how conservative views in trans local ministry affect the experiences of women in ministry. What can be done to help women to thrive when that is the case? An exploration into what is expected of trans local ministers when it comes to expressing their own theological thinking, particularly when it does not enable women who are called to ministry, and what accountability structures are in place for the good of the whole of Baptists Together and those who serve in leadership within national, regional and local church life.

3. National/Regional Hubs

Clarification on the relationship between national and regional hubs and some joined up thinking. At a minimum, the national gender justice hub should be made up of people working on gender/women's justice within the regions and local and national agendas need to be linked up.

4. Resourcing

A budget for justice in our associations, and full backing of Regional Teams and Association Trustees is important. The ideal would be to have a named RM responsible for justice and active in issues of justice in each association.

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London Baptists Women's Justice Subgroup – Aims and Purpose

The Women's Justice subgroup is part of London Baptists Justice Hub. We seek to raise awareness of issues that women encounter and to challenge where we see injustice happening. Working in collaboration with others we

- seek to promote balance in our churches in leadership, noting that currently women make up less than 20% of fully accredited ministers in our churches, and recognising that the journey to this point has been slow and often painful.
- Celebrating the ways women are already leading and contributing in association and local church life.
- Explore ways in which we can encourage more women in London Baptist churches into accredited and other forms of ministry
- Look to make opportunities and create spaces for women ministers to meet, network and offer mutual support
- Encourage all members of London Baptists, including the wider association and local churches, to keep justice issues relating to women on their radar, and to raise up advocates and allies who can speak up when inequality and injustice is evident.
- Raise awareness of issues of injustice in wider society where women are treated unequally and are prevented from becoming all they have been created to be.

Underlying our commitment to women's justice is the creation narrative in Genesis 1, where when God created humankind, we were created in God's image, male and female, and it is as we find balance in gender, that we reflect God's image better. The issue of justice is a Gospel issue, and where we find justice, we see more of Jesus.