**January 2025 Project Violet Symposium**

**Building an understanding of trauma into support of women ministers**

**Introduction**

As I read through the Project Violet findings, I was expecting to find a section on trauma, and was disappointed when there was none, after all, this is why such a project needed to be undertaken – because women ministers had experienced trauma, and lives and ministries have been damaged because of it. Pam Searle, in her section, *The Experiences of Women Who Leave Baptist Church Ministry* highlights how difficult it is to locate women who have left ministry. Of course, there are a variety of reasons, but I wondered how many have left because they were broken by ministry? At the beginning of Project Violet, women ministers were asked to share their stories, and many of the stories contained words spoken to or over them that had caused trauma. What it has revealed is that many women ministers, myself included have had trauma filled experiences in churches which have left their mark.

As I reflect on over twenty years in Baptist ministry, I wonder how different the support from Associations and the Union would have been had there been a better understanding of trauma and the impact it has on individuals. Would my own journey through ministry have been less painful had there been a community beyond the local church who were willing to accompany me and advocate for me when I did not have the ability to speak for myself?

In this paper, the discussion around trauma-sensitive support will highlight limitations in the current Baptist Union structures, as well as seeking a way forward that will shore up support for all women in ministry, especially those who have experienced ministry-based trauma.

**What is trauma?**

The definition of trauma is difficult to pin down. There is consensus that trauma is a disturbing and distressing experience, a life and death moment. However, as Janyne McConnaughy states, ‘Traumatic events can vary greatly.’[[1]](#footnote-1) She argues that although there is a traumatic event to look back at, trauma is how an individual responds to what has happened. Trauma is not just an event in time, but what is carried even after the event has passed. It’s that which sits in the spirit. Shelly Rambo makes the same point, ‘Students of trauma attempt to discern and witness the marks of an event – a wound – that remains long after the precipitating… events are over.’[[2]](#footnote-2)

Rambo argues, ‘Trauma is distinguished from other experiences of suffering in that a person’s capacity to respond to and integrate the experience is severely impaired.’[[3]](#footnote-3) In short, a trauma experience changes the person irrevocably. In his book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel Van Der Kolk gives interesting insights into how trauma affects the brain and the body[[4]](#footnote-4). Trauma changes the way the brain works and is a heavy load for the body to carry.

Therefore, if someone has experienced trauma they cannot escape the effects. The trauma will change the way they view themselves, their view of the world and will have an impact on their walk with God.

**What is ministry based trauma?**

For the purpose of this paper, ministry-based traumas are traumatic events that happen because a person is in a position of ministry. They are events, moments in time, wounds that happen because of the position of leadership we hold. These events will vary greatly,[[5]](#footnote-5) and will need to be addressed because their impact lies heavily on each minister.

Having been in ministry for so long, you would expect me to be a bit battered! However, there are two significant times when I consider that battering was a time of ministry-based trauma, and I would like to share them. Both events are in the past, yet I continue to live with the effects. One was the murder of one of my church members, killed by her son. My role in supporting her family meant I heard all the gruesome details. This alongside pastorally holding the church family was traumatising. When I reached out for help, friends were there for a time, but there was not a professional structure in place for me to lean into.

Secondly, and much more recently, a church turned against me and almost broke me. I am still on a healing journey, even though I am no longer in that church. Within the last year, even as I have engaged with the Project Violet findings, my lived ministry experience is that, within our Baptist family, there is not a structure in place to support me when I am encountering ministry-based trauma.

Despite all the stories already shared and known experiences I keep being told I am not the only woman experiencing trauma in ministry. With that being the case, where is the support? It seems that support is not in place for each of us, and many ministers do not feel safe enough to share the fragility of their brokenness in ministry. For some women leaders, when there is trauma, it feels safer to become distracted by ministry than taking a risk to ask for help. Perhaps too many have asked for help, to no avail?

**Weaknesses in current system.**

No minister can plan for a traumatic event. There are times when things are beyond anyone’s control, and in those moments, the support needed increases. Project Violet finding R55 calls on the Ministries Team and Associations ‘To improve the accompaniment of women Ministers.’ That improvement is being called for in everyday ministry. That support needs to be increased when women ministers are affected by ministry-based trauma.

Reflecting on my ministry, and from conversations with other ministers, because of the way our Baptist denomination is structured, both the Ministries Team and Associations can feel disconnected from the life of the minister. With the main focus of their support being aimed at the churches, ministers feel left out and isolated. Neither Regional Ministers nor the Ministries Team are given specific training for their role which is different to a local church minister. As a result, when women minister experiences church-based trauma and seek support from the Regional or Ministries Team they may experience a lack of engagement, a lack of care, and someone supporting them with the propensity to say the wrong things. This response only compounds the impact of trauma.

When any minister experiences trauma, but especially when it happens at the hands of their church community, support needs to come from outside that church. It would be helpful to see changes within the Baptist structure, for safe spaces to be created, where those who have been wounded can seek help for their stories to be validated, to have been heard and believed is so very important. The counselling room is one safe space, but there are limitations around how many sessions the Baptist Union are prepared to help fund. Once that funding runs out, the financial cost is massive, and not every woman in ministry can afford the cost.

**Suggestions for change.**

**Baptist Women in Ministry**

Following my time studying in North Carolina, I have been interested in the Baptist Women in Ministry model for supporting women in ministry. BWiM is an organisation set up to hold and encourage women in various ministry settings. On its web page, BWiM states, ‘Our mission is to support women who pursue ministry and leadership with sustaining resources and community, and to advocate for the full affirmation of women in ministry and leadership in Baptist life.’[[6]](#footnote-6)

BWiM exists to help women flourish in leadership and creates many opportunities for women leaders to connect. One of the opportunities is to partner a new minister with a more experienced woman in leadership for the first 18 months of the new minister’s ministry. This is ‘intentional mentorship’, an opportunity to share stories for both women. BWiM also runs, ‘Peer Community Groups,’ which bring women together. This relational approach to supporting women leaders means when any of these women experience trauma in ministry, there are relationships already in place to provide help and support.

This model shows us that the opportunity for relationship needs to be available from the beginning of Ministry. It has similarities to the mentor given to every Newly Accredited Minister in the UK but with greater intentionality. Newly Accredited women Ministers could be linked with those women who have been in ministry for a significant time, and part of the mentor training could include the recognition of trauma, and where to signpost for help. UK Baptists could learn from these Peer Community Groups and set up a similar opportunity where connections can be made.

**Trauma-informed support.**

Van der Kolk recognises the need for those who have experienced trauma to be able to move out of a trauma response. One of his suggestions is ‘…Finding a responsive group in which to tell your truth makes recovery possible.’[[7]](#footnote-7) For those not in leadership and ministry positions, this could be the church community. For the minister, there needs to be a space outside the community she serves, a place where the wounds from ministry can be tended.

This space could be people who are trained to support those who are dealing with ministry-based trauma. Those who will give affirmation and support. There is the need to speak out one’s story especially when it is dark and difficult. Van Der Kolk makes the point, ‘Silence about trauma leads to death – the death of the soul.’[[8]](#footnote-8) The stories of women Ministers, our stories need to be heard beyond the counselling room and learning from the stories needs to be implemented.

**Advocacy.**

When dealing with ministry-based trauma, finding the words to speak it out can be difficult. It can be overwhelming to negotiate conversations with a difficult church, your Regional Ministers and representatives of BUGB. What may be helpful is to have Advocates available who could stand alongside the Minister. They would speak for her when she is unable to speak for herself. MIND says that ‘Advocacy means getting support from another person to help you express your views and wishes, and help you stand up for your rights.’[[9]](#footnote-9)

The Regional Minister cannot take on the role of an advocate; and trauma is compounded with the minister becomes a conflict of interest. An Advocate would unashamedly be on the side of the Minister, regardless of the outcome of the conflict within the church. They would be the voice of the Minister when she is unable to engage with the Regional Team. An individual outside of the Baptist Union structures who would provide accompaniment and support, allowing the Minister to have a safe space in which to speak without judgement.

**Training for Regional Ministers.**

Ministry is unlike any other profession. There is a call from God, to which the individual responds. Confirmation of that call comes through recognition of a local church. Then the individual goes to college to be formed. Then, there are those who feel the call to Regional Ministry, have an interview, get the job, and even though there is now responsibility for a wider part of the Baptist family, there is no specific training to the additional roles and responsibilities. It seems they learn whilst on the job.

One consequence of this lack of training for Regional Ministers is there is a high risk that people will get hurt if situations are not handled well. Relationships between church ministers and the Regional Team can break down when Regional Ministers are not compassionate in their response. Trauma is exacerbated when wrong things are said. Better investment in the training of Regional Ministers would reduce the risk of woundedness in the Baptist family. In that training, an understanding of trauma would help greatly.

**Cost**

I understand that to each of my suggestions there is a cost implication. Financial investment in training and support will be great. However, there is a much higher cost for not investing.

**How would my journey have looked different with better support?**

Had there been a group of women, willing to hear my story, validate my experiences, and journey with me until I was able to function again, I would have felt much less isolated and alone. It would have made a difference. Project Violet has seen the need for better support of women in ministry. If that support comes with an understanding of trauma, then those who have been wounded in ministry will move from their woundedness to a place of healing.

1. McCaunaughy, Janyne. *Trauma in the Pews: The Impact on Faith and Spiritual Practices.* Berry Powell Press, 2022. p.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rambo, Shelly. *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining.* John Knox Press, 2010. p.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rambo. *Spirit and Trauma.* p.18. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Van Der Kolk, Bessel. *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain, and Body in the Transformation of Trauma.* Penguin Books, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. McConnaughty. *Trauma in the Pews.* p3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://bwim.info/who-we-are/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Van der Kolk. *The Body Keeps the Score.* p.244. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Van Der Kolk. *The Body Keeps the Score.* p. 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/advocacy/what-is-advocacy/#:~:text=Advocacy%20means%20getting%20support%20from,way%20is%20called%20your%20advocate>. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)