**Baptist Women Called to Serve:**

**Facing Challenges in Great Britain and Atlantic Canada**

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Since the beginnings of the Baptist movement in 1609, God has called Baptist women to serve in God’s mission. Whether formally or informally, women have served in roles such as Sunday school teacher, worship leader, pastoral counsellor, and preacher. Beginning in the twentieth century, various Baptist groups began exploring the possibility of ordaining women to ministry. In Great Britain, Violet Hedger was the first woman to enter a Baptist college to be trained for ministry; she began studies in 1919 and was ordained in 1926.[[1]](#footnote-2) In Canada, women’s ordination came a bit later. This paper will focus on the four Atlantic Canadian provinces of Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and New Brunswick, although Baptists in central and western Canada experienced similar milestones.[[2]](#footnote-3) In Atlantic Canada, while the first woman was licensed to ministry in 1919, the first woman was not ordained until 1954. Male denominational leaders in the early twentieth century were apparently hesitant to formally recognize women’s callings to vocational ministry in the same way as they recognized men’s. Following 1954, only eight other women were ordained across three decades. Between 1984 and 2024, though, more than one hundred women were ordained by Atlantic Baptist churches, as women’s roles began to expand in church as well as in society.[[3]](#footnote-4) In 2024, women made up around eighteen percent of accredited ministers in both Atlantic Canada and Great Britain.[[4]](#footnote-5)

My research project, Called to Serve, features oral histories of more than eighty-five ordained Baptist women in Atlantic Canada.[[5]](#footnote-6) Like Project Violet, it probes women’s experiences in vocational ministry, including in training for ministry roles. Unlike Project Violet, it does not include contemporary recommendations but instead focuses on historical analysis—although much of this is quite recent history. In this paper, I compare findings of Called to Serve with those of Project Violet, emphasizing the stories of Baptist women from Atlantic Canada.[[6]](#footnote-7) Overall, I conclude that women serving in Baptist ministry in Great Britain and in Atlantic Canada in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries faced similar challenges as a result of their sex, although further research is needed to establish a thorough comparison. As demonstrated by the two studies, women in both contexts encountered challenges related to their experiences in ministry. This reflects the women’s relatively conservative Baptist contexts and the reluctance of some autonomous Baptist congregations to fully support women in ministry, as well as the ways women’s roles were changing in the cultures of Great Britain and Canada at the time. Chronologically, British Baptists were ahead of Baptists in Atlantic Canada in advancing women’s roles in ministry, but women ministers in both contexts continued to experience challenges as of the writing of this paper.

**Ministry Preparation**

Baptist ministerial candidates in both Atlantic Canada and Great Britain acknowledged God’s call on their lives and then underwent training for ministry. Although the exact processes differed, in both contexts candidates were given opportunities to learn and to exercise their ministerial skills. However, women candidates sometimes faced challenges that men did not. According to “Project Violet Findings—An Overview,” young women in Great Britain who were exploring their callings sometimes heard “sexist, racist and ableist language going unchallenged,” which “made them wonder if there was a stereotype of ministry that they wouldn’t be able to meet.”[[7]](#footnote-8) In addition, women who had decided to enter ministry “could come across barriers to accessing training. These could include lack of information about the process, difficulties in navigating the college admission process and difficulty raising the money to pay for training and sustaining their household whilst they trained.”[[8]](#footnote-9) Other Project Violet materials speak of sexism that women faced in ministry and ministry training, whether it was overt or covert.[[9]](#footnote-10)

Women interviewed for Called to Serve in Atlantic Canada also experienced challenges in their ministry preparation because of their sex. Not all the women encountered significant difficulties, nor did the challenges dominate all their ministries. Sandra Sutherland, for example, said, “I never have had anything really difficult to deal with personally in my ministry because I am a woman.”[[10]](#footnote-11) However, other women experienced situations that they believe men would not have encountered. These began for some women at a young age. Marion Jamer recalled, “As I turned about 16 and 17, I began to notice that it was much easier for a young man to say he was going into ministry than it was for me.”[[11]](#footnote-12) Jamer persevered, but some young women who were exploring a call to ministry likely abandoned this idea as too difficult or unrealistic. Even Sutherland reflected on her own experience: “I thought, well, really the deepest desire of my heart is to become a pastor's wife. And now when I look back on that, I realize that that was the other role model [besides missionary] that I had seen for women who loved and served the church.”[[12]](#footnote-13) Unlike their male colleagues, these women had to grapple with their callings in a denomination where some believed that the Bible prohibited women from serving as ministers. Some of them, like Sutherland, also lacked “intentional support in discerning their vocation,” as Project Violet put it.[[13]](#footnote-14) As a result, the women I interviewed may have taken more time to decide that God was asking them to serve as ministers, but they likely felt more secure in their callings after examining the issue. This confidence propelled them through difficult times in their ministries, including in their education.

Most of the women who participated in my study sought training for ministry at Acadia Divinity College (ADC), the Atlantic Baptist seminary. While women students found their professors to be supportive of women in ministry, this was not always the case among their peers, especially in earlier years.[[14]](#footnote-15) Several women noted that although “it wasn't a big controversy,”[[15]](#footnote-16) there were what Sarah Palmater called “undercurrents”[[16]](#footnote-17) of male students at ADC who didn’t support women in ministry. Two of the earliest students featured in this study felt such opposition during their time at ADC in the 1970s. Elizabeth Legassie described “a small percentage [of male students who were] very vocal, and very strong,” confessing that she and her husband almost left ADC as a result.[[17]](#footnote-18) Similarly, Ida Armstrong-Whitehouse had fellow students tell her that she was “making a big mistake” by studying for what they considered an unbiblical role for women.[[18]](#footnote-19) Legassie and Armstrong-Whitehouse persevered in their studies and eventually were ordained, but later female students also experienced sexism and opposition from their male colleagues.[[19]](#footnote-20) Michele Bland described a student who would not attend presentations given by women classmates, and Jennifer Varner recalled strong words of opposition that several women students received from men.[[20]](#footnote-21) Some of the men’s comments were blatantly sexist. A male student told Robin McCoombs, “I don't know if I could really listen to the message if a woman was wearing a black slinky dress in the pulpit.”[[21]](#footnote-22) And a male student told Heather Donovan that she was earning high marks in her classes because she was pretty.[[22]](#footnote-23) These troubling incidents created an antagonistic atmosphere for at least some women students, no matter the verbal support they received from ADC faculty and staff.

As women continued the ordination process, they prepared to meet with the denomination’s examining council. At this council, they defended their statements of faith and answered doctrinal questions posed by dozens of leaders from Baptist associations throughout Atlantic Canada. For both men and women, this experience was often intimidating. Jasmine Saunders was not the only one to call it “the Sanhedrin.”[[23]](#footnote-24) But women faced additional obstacles, as some members of the examining council would vote against them simply because of their sex. Renée MacVicar, who became executive minister of Atlantic Baptists in 2023, recalled that as late as 2009, “two people voted against me because I was a woman.”[[24]](#footnote-25) In later years, council members with such views were asked to abstain from voting rather than to vote against the candidate. Still, male candidates did not face this difficulty. Women were sometimes also asked about their positions on women in ministry or how they would address hypothetical challenges in ministry due to their sex. Margo MacDougall recounted, “A lady from Nova Scotia said, ‘Now, you're in the pulpit and you're preaching, and you look down and there's a very attractive man in the congregation. What are you going to do?’” To this questioner, apparently a woman minister’s sexuality was more concerning than a man’s. Although she found this question inappropriate, MacDougall simply said she would “keep preaching.”[[25]](#footnote-26) Like most other women in my study, she avoided controversy, prioritizing harmony over advocacy by using what I have termed elsewhere “strategic silence.”[[26]](#footnote-27)

**Local Church Ministry**

After they had spent years preparing for ministry, Baptist women in both studies moved into vocational ministry positions. Project Violet findings indicated that settlement in a local church was “not always a positive experience for women. They can experience intrusive and inappropriate questioning and a lack of support in agreeing fair terms and conditions for their work, particularly when it is for less than a full stipend. . . . Where a church does not accept the ministry of women it is requested that that position is made know prior to the settlement process.”[[27]](#footnote-28) Some women in this study experienced inequality when seeking a place to serve, even discovering in the midst of the process that the churches where they had hoped to serve did not support women in ministry.

Some women in Atlantic Canada likewise found the process of finding a church challenging. For example, when Rachel Kwan first began to look for a pastorate in New Brunswick, she was told that “it would be more possible to find a pastoral position only in the next province.”[[28]](#footnote-29) Marlene Quinn also mentioned the informal networking that occurs among men in ministry. “The males tend to have a heads up on what's going to become vacant,” she stated. “Women don’t get that.”[[29]](#footnote-30) Some women recalled interview questions that were different for women and men in ministry. Kwan recounted that many women applying for ministry roles were asked by church search committees, “‘Tell us why women can be pastors.’” She continued, “If a man were going in for an interview for that same position, we can safely say that it is unlikely for him to be asked: ‘Can you tell us why a man can be a pastor?’”[[30]](#footnote-31) Questions not only to job candidates but also to congregations differed at times for women pastors. Margo MacDougall was stunned that a leader asked a congregation, “How would you feel about an ex-con or a woman coming as your pastor?”[[31]](#footnote-32)—in a sense equating individuals from these two disparate categories. Other women recounted that some church members voted against calling a female minister, and they were not always given the same compensation or titles as their male counterparts. Nancy Draper recalled, “The sign on my door bore testimony that it was okay for me to be Director of Christian Education, but I couldn't be Minister of Christian Education.”[[32]](#footnote-33) Ministerial roles, her church apparently believed, were reserved for men.

In their study of clergy women, Barbara Zikmund et al. noted that women ministers “report that they feel discrimination because they are not paid well.”[[33]](#footnote-34) This was true of some of the women in my study. Some churches seemed to assume that male ministers were the primary breadwinners for their families, but female ministers were only supplementing their husbands’ salaries. Christine MacDormand, for example, recalled that she did not go to the dentist for 25 years because of inadequate health coverage.[[34]](#footnote-35) Joyce Hancock also was underpaid by her church, as she reported:

I think it was some of the women in the congregation, when it came around to budget time, they made a big deal about the fact that I was earning much, much less than the rest of the pastoral team. And they came forward and said they would not accept if I, if it had not gotten better. But what I heard from the lead pastor later on was, ‘Wow, you're getting a good increase this time! Aren't you lucky?’ Instead of words like, you know, ‘The church has asked that, that you be put up more to the level of the vision.’ It was more like, ‘Well, aren’t you lucky?’[[35]](#footnote-36)

Hancock’s situation revealed the sexism of her lead pastor along with that of the congregation, while also demonstrating the growing awareness of equality among a few female congregants. Also significant was that Hancock herself did not bring up the issue of her remuneration; she remained silent. Whether this strategy compromised her ministry or was necessary to preserve it is debatable. What is clear is that Hancock, like the majority of the women involved in my study, did not pursue feminist activism in the course of her ministry, preferring instead to keep her head down and serve.[[36]](#footnote-37)

Like Hancock, many of the women in the study experienced challenges in ministry. Although they also encountered joys, serving in roles that were not traditional for women sometimes presented difficulties. Some obstacles that the women faced were overt. Renée MacVicar recalled, “A young man actually met me as I was coming back to my seat from preaching and said, ‘What are you doing? What do you do with 2 Timothy? You need to repent.’”[[37]](#footnote-38) This individual directly confronted MacVicar, viscerally demonstrating the view of some Atlantic Baptists that women should not serve in ministry. Other women recounted that even before they became ministers, their churches were hesitant about having women teach adult Sunday school classes.[[38]](#footnote-39) Such churches would likely not have allowed women to preach. Those women whom churches did call as ministers sometimes faced difficulties from their congregations. Some of these came in the form of inappropriate relationships by congregants who had idealized or sexualized their ministers. Margo MacDougall reported receiving “varying degrees of unwanted attention,” including from an elderly man who stalked her and another whose wife called the pastor her husband’s girlfriend.[[39]](#footnote-40) Other women in the study described not being taken seriously as ministers. Robin McCoombs, who served as co-pastor with her husband, described that “I was most times called the pastor's wife, not the pastor . . . which I found very frustrating at times because we took turns preaching . . . took turns leading Bible studies. I did funerals, weddings, everything that my husband did. . . . One guy [said], ‘You're just your husband's secretary.’”[[40]](#footnote-41) Although McCoombs and her husband served equally in ministry, some congregants had a hard time changing their stereotypical view of men’s and women’s roles in the church. As Marilyn McCormick put it, “They would look to the man to be the one in charge even when it might not have been.”[[41]](#footnote-42) Not only was such an experience disturbing for women ministers; it also robbed the church of the opportunity to allow a minister to fully use their God-given gifts. Moreover, these incidents represent only a sampling of the challenges that Called to Serve respondents faced as women in ministry.

**Conclusion**

Multiple Baptist women in Atlantic Canada, then, experienced difficulties as they prepared for and served in Christian ministry. Like Baptist women in Great Britain, they faced challenges related to their callings, training for ministry, settlement in local churches, and ongoing church ministry. Further comparative study is needed, but even from the anecdotal evidence cited here, it is clear that due to their sex, women in both ministry contexts encountered obstacles that most men did not. As part of the dissenting church tradition, Baptist women in the Canada and Great Britain did not follow traditional hierarchical church authorities but instead respected the independence of local congregations, which could choose whether to allow women to serve in ministry or not. In Atlantic Canada, at least, a significant number of congregations and their members were hesitant to fully support women ministers, as evidenced by Called to Serve. And in Baptist life in Great Britain, Project Violet asserts that women ministers faced “theological, missional and structural obstacles.”[[42]](#footnote-43) Those concerned about gender justice in both regions clearly have more work to do in the future.

1. “Violet Hedger,” Baptists Together, https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/529776/Violet\_Hedger.aspx, accessed 18 December 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The first woman was ordained by a Baptist church in central Canada in 1947; in western Canada, in 1959. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Other denominations followed similar trends. See Elizabeth G. Muir and Marilyn F. Whiteley, *Changing Roles of Women within the Christian Church in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); Valerie J Korinek, “No Women Need Apply: The Ordination of Women in the United Church, 1918–1965,” *Canadian Historical Review* 74.4 (1993) 473–509; Leanne Friesen and Taylor Murray, “‘It takes a While for People’s Hearts to Catch Up with Their Heads’: Women’s Ordination in the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec, 1947–1979,” *McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry*, forthcoming; and Melody Maxwell, “‘Proceed with Care’: Atlantic Baptists and Women’s Ordination in the 1980s,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 55 (2020) 52–69. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. “Women in Ministry: Looking at the Statistics—January 2024,” Project Violet, Baptists Together, https://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/363283/What\_is\_Project.aspx; email from Andrew Myers, Canadian Baptists of Atlantic Canada, 2 January 2025. Today there are around 420 churches in the Canadian Baptists of Atlantic Canada, which I have referred to as Atlantic Baptists in this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. I am indebted to research assistants Taylor Adams, Taylore Anstey, Samantha Diotte, Joetta Fernando, Melissa Hodder, and Hannah Roberts for their work on this project. For more information about the project, visit calledtoserve.ca. Findings presented in this paper are only preliminary; complete findings will be available by 2026. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Parts of this paper were adapted from previous presentations: “Called to Learn: Educational Experiences among Atlantic Baptist Women in Ministry, 1970-2020,” International Conference on Baptist Studies X, Cambridge, UK, August 8, 2024 (to be published by Mercer University Press in *Baptists and Education*); and “In Their Own Words: Pioneering Canadian Baptist Women in Ministry,” William M. Pinson lecture presented at Truett Theological Seminary, Waco, TX, USA, March 1, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. “Project Violet Findings—An Overview,” Project Violet, Baptists Together, https://www.baptist.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=352660, 2, accessed 18 December 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. See “Commitment to Action Report,” Project Violet, Baptists Together, https://www.baptist.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=362964, accessed 18 December 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Sandra Sutherland, interviewed by Taylore Anstey, via Zoom, July 11, 2023, transcript, 6. Sutherland’s comments that follow, however, demonstrate that she did have to overcome stereotypes to become a minister, among other things. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Marion Jamer, interviewed by Taylore Anstey, via Zoom, February 8-10, 2024, transcript, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Sandra Sutherland, interviewed by Taylore Anstey, via Zoom, July 11, 2023, transcript, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. “Project Violet Findings—An Overview,” Project Violet, Baptists Together, https://www.baptist.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=352660, 2, accessed 18 December 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. See “Called to Learn: Educational Experiences among Atlantic Baptist Women in Ministry, 1970-2020,” International Conference on Baptist Studies X, Cambridge, UK, August 8, 2024 (to be published by Mercer University Press in *Baptists and Education*). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Carol Smith, interviewed by Taylore Anstey, via Zoom, July 10, 2023, transcript, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Sarah Palmater, interviewed by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, via Zoom, December 3, 2019, transcript, 3 and 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Elizabeth Legassie, interviewed by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, via Zoom, January 30, 2020, transcript, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Ida Armstrong-Whitehouse, interviewed by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, via Zoom, December 4, 2019, transcript, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Nancy Nason-Clark demonstrates that sexism also exists among men in the pews. Nancy Nason-Clark, "Ordaining Women as Priests: Religious Vs. Sexist Explanations for Clerical Attitudes," *Sociological Analysis* 48, no. 3 (Fall 1987): 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Michele Bland, interviewed by Hannah Roberts, via Zoom, February 16 and 17, 2023, transcript, 4; Jennifer Varner, interviewed by Taylore Anstey, via Zoom, November 21, 2023, transcript, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Robin McCoombs, interviewed by Melody Maxwell, via Zoom, April 4, 2023, transcript, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Heather Donovan, interviewed by Taylore Anstey, via Zoom, August 21, 2023, transcript, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Jasmine Saunders (pseudonym), interviewed by Melody Maxwell, via Zoom, March 31, 2023, transcript, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Renée MacVicar, interviewed by Hannah Roberts, via Zoom, March 2, 2023, transcript, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Margo MacDougall, interviewed by Hannah Roberts, via Zoom, January 26, 2023, transcript, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. See “In Their Own Words: Pioneering Canadian Baptist Women in Ministry,” William M. Pinson lecture presented at Truett Theological Seminary, Waco, TX, USA, March 1, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. “Project Violet Findings—An Overview,” Project Violet, Baptists Together, https://www.baptist.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=352660, 3, accessed 18 December 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. Rachel Kwan, interviewed by Hannah Roberts, via Zoom, February 7, 2023, transcript, 4. Baptists in Nova Scotia have traditionally been more supportive of women in ministry than have Baptists in New Brunswick. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Marlene Quinn, interviewed by Hannah Roberts, via Zoom, November 28, 2022, transcript, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Rachel Kwan, interviewed by Hannah Roberts, via Zoom, February 7, 2023, transcript, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Margo MacDougall, interviewed by Hannah Roberts, via Zoom, January 26, 2023, transcript, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Nancy Draper, interviewed by Melody Maxwell, via Zoom, April 11, 2023, transcript, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Barbara Brown Zikmund, Adair T. Lummis, and Patricia M. Y. Chang, *Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. Christine MacDormand, interviewed by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, via Zoom, February 14, 2020, transcript, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. Joyce Hancock, interviewed by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, via Zoom, January 30, 2020, transcript, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. See “In Their Own Words: Pioneering Canadian Baptist Women in Ministry,” William M. Pinson lecture presented at Truett Theological Seminary, Waco, TX, USA, March 1, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. Renée MacVicar, interviewed by Hannah Roberts, via Zoom, March 2, 2023, transcript, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. Margo MacDougall, interviewed by Hannah Roberts, via Zoom, January 26, 2023, transcript, 2; Linda Perrin, interviewed by Taylore Anstey, via Zoom, February 10, 2024, transcript, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. Margo MacDougall, interviewed by Hannah Roberts, via Zoom, January 26, 2023, transcript, 13, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. Robin McCoombs, interviewed by Melody Maxwell, via Zoom, April 4, 2023, transcript, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. Marilyn McCormick, interviewed by Hannah Robertson, via Zoom, August 18, 2022, transcript, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. “Project Violet Findings—An Overview,” Project Violet, Baptists Together, https://www.baptist.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=352660, 1, accessed 18 December 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)