Slow wisdom and the practice of discernment in appointment

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***Introduction***

In 1922 a series of letters began in the Baptist Times concerning women in ministry, and on 19 January 1923 a simple letter appeared entitled ‘Lady Pastors’ which said:

Sir – Having seen in the Daily Chronicle of the 11th inst. that a Baptist Church in Wales has a lady pastor, we should like to say that our pastor is also a lady, Miss Edith Gates, and has held this position for the past five years, having two churches in her charge, Little Tew and Cleveley (Baptist) with a distance of four miles between each. We had eleven members received in one year, which testifies to the good work being done. She has recently passed the BU exam and her name enrolled upon the probationers list.

*Edward Webb, George Dean, Deacons.*

*Little Tew, Enstone Oxon. (Baptist Times cited Voke, 2023, p. 37)*

The Little Tew and Cleveley Church Meetings pioneered female ministers by calling Edith Gates in 1918. Baptists can celebrate Edith and all the following female ministerial appointments; now 23% of current ministers in the Baptist Union. This paper explores the role of the Church Meeting in discerning a call to train for ministry and in settlement to ministerial appointment in light of the findings of Project Violet.

In this paper I argue that female candidates for Baptist ministerial training generally experience a positive environment of discerning a call in their home church where the Church Meeting uses the marks of slow wisdom to discern together (Moriarty, 2024). However, in settlement, unknown candidates find a more varied response to their ministry at the Church Meeting. The research uncovered by Project Violet indicates that female candidates encounter difficulties in this local context of being a test case (Crane, 2023) and are typically subject to stereotyping in appointments (Project Violet Theological Reflection Report 4, 2023) which also echo experiences of women in the Church of England (Graveling, 2015). I suggest that the production of the self-sufficient man in theological education (Jennings, 2020) helps to shape the ‘stained glass ceiling’ that women experience at settlement (Sullins, 2000). I argue that the use of slow wisdom and changes to the design of the Church Meeting will help create a positive environment for churches and female ministers in settlement.

***Recommendation R48 and Research design***

Project Violet generated 57 requests for change from 17 co-researcher and four theological reflection reports regarding women’s experience of Baptist ministry. Recommendation R48 requests my reflection on the ‘role of local churches in the discernment of callings and settlement decisions’ following on from my doctoral research into the Baptist Church Meeting; ‘How do Baptists discern the mind of Christ at the Church Meeting? (2024). Within the request for change one co-researcher report and Theological Reflection Report were determined by the Project Violet conference (April 2024) to be directly relevant to recommendation 48 which has in turn formed the research design of this paper. These reports were contributed by co-researcher Sarah Crane who interviewed four Baptist ministers operating as chaplains surrounding the theme of flourishing in chaplaincy as opposed to church-based ministry. She identified that female ministers encounter difficulties in appointment as they present a test case to the ministry context. The typical experience is that a female minister is the first female minister to be appointed, therefore questions are raised of how a female minister would manage with the job and whether additional safeguards should be in place for pastoral visiting and 121 meetings. Crane (2023) summarizes that a female minister experiences pressure as she is ‘appointed as a trial of all female ministry’ rather than related to their individual merit as a minister. Secondly, the Project Violet Theological Reflection Report (TRR) 4 argues that female ministers experience difficulty in appointment due to stereotypes connected to ministers. The report states:

The stereotype is a full-time male minister, assisted unpaid by his wife. We recognise that this stereotype can lead to overworking which in turn generates unrealistic expectations. (2023)

The report recognises that some female ministers also experience and intersection of stereotyping related to disability and gender. In summary the report recommends the adoption of diversity training in local churches, it encourages local churches to pro-actively offer flexibility and accommodations to female candidates alongside a request for regional staff and moderators to assist local churches in such matters.

In light of the two reports, and the request of R48, I designed an online survey of female ministers in my region. Due to a short timeframe between the Project Violet research publication and this symposium, a survey with limited questions was preferred over interviews to fit the scale of this paper (Mason, 2002). Nonetheless, as this paper shows it would be a fruitful area for further qualitative study. As none of the original data used in Project Violet was accessible for further research,, I chose to explore further the themes of expectations of competency of female ministers and being a test case for ministry identified by Crane (2023), I included the following questions in the survey design: ‘How many churches have you been called by?’, ‘In which churches were you the first female minister ?’ and ‘Have you felt like a test-case for a church?’ and in relation to TRR 4 (2023) ‘Did you encounter any stereotypes about being a female minister?’. Alongside these particular questions, I included more general questions on the topics of settlement, calling, and discernment in the Church Meeting. This short survey was designed to be focussed on testing the Project Violet findings and developing them for the benefit of female ministers navigating the local Church Meeting.

***Access and data***

As a female Baptist minister in London, I contacted the London Baptists (LB) regional office who were supportive of the project and circulated my request for survey participants to all female ministers in the region. Out of 292 churches in LB, there are 240 accredited ministers of which 38 are women. Each female minister was emailed the google forms survey link in mid-July 2024 and asked to complete it within two weeks. Seven female ministers completed the survey at an average (mean) age of 33. Each participant has been an accredited Baptist minister in the Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) for an average (mean) of 7.4 years. In terms of experience, all participants had been called to ministry by their home church. Consequently, four participants had been settled into ministries in two churches since ordination and three had been settled as ministers in three different appointments either to churches or into chaplaincy roles. Each participant’s data was given a female name at random, therefore all contributions are anonymised. Data was coded using structural coding in order to examine commonalities, differences and relationships (Saldana, 2016, p. 98) alongside using analytical memos suitable for this short research design.

***‘Positive’ in discerning a call***

Five out of seven survey participants described the Church Meeting as a ‘positive’ experience in discerning a call into ministry in which the model of slow wisdom can be seen. Of the positive experiences, Amy’s is typical:

Over the course of a couple of meetings my calling was introduced, people were invited to pray and the diaconate invited encouraging feedback from members.

In this description the Church Meeting provides a framework for a slow process of exploration of calling, including prayer and church members participating in discernment which shows the marks of slow wisdom in discernment at work.

Slow wisdom is slow, listens to all members, and seeks consensus agreement through a prayerful and prophetic atmosphere. The theological emphasis on participation, described as ‘this body life’ is shown to be based on biblical images of the church as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12.4-27) as the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2.4-5) (Moriarty, 2024, p. 4).

By testing a call over a series of Church Meetings, slow wisdom is found over time and through careful deliberation of members which is also helpful for candidates in the process of discernment. It is an expression of lived wisdom held within the Baptist emphasis on the church as the body of Christ.

Discerning a call to ministry slowly is often punctuated with several votes as Gail highlighted:

They voted for me 3 times - once to call me as a MIT [Minister-In-Training] for a year, once to call me for the rest of my training (100%) that time, and then to call me when ordained.

Through the process of voting, members exercise their spiritual role as members and honour the theological tradition of the priesthood of all believers whereby the membership discern the activity of the Spirit in leading the Baptist church in discernment. Critical to positive experiences of calling for candidates is the support of the local church leadership team, as shown by Fay: ‘My calling was then endorsed/affirmed by the minister and the deacons in that same Church Meeting’. The diaconate’s (or leadership team) support of the candidate is shown in fostering a supportive environment of care in Amy’s case and affirmation in Fay’s. The remaining commonality of the positive experiences is a recognition that each candidate is well known to the church as Belinda stated: ‘I had attended and served in the church for 11 years’ and as Fay outlined: ‘I was well known ... they heard me preach many times’. The Church Meeting is an overwhelmingly positive environment for women discerning a call to ministry for those who are established members within the local church. Each candidate is heard through a series of Meetings whereby a calling is discerned slowly with ample space made for the participation of members in prayer, listening to candidates share, and then affirmed through voting on at least one occasion.

***‘Dissent’ in settlement***

Female ministers found the Church Meeting to be more variable and less supportive in the settlement process of calling a candidate pastoral ministry in comparison to identifying a call to ministry from a home church. Amy described her experience of the Church Meeting as ‘fractious and frustrating’ with theological dissent for women in ministry expressed directly at two different churches while considering her appointment, she was not appointed to either church. However, when Catherine encountered similar issues the diaconate ‘had to take the process slower’ which resulted in a positive discussion among the member and her appointment. For churches that did not engage in a slow process Gail suggested ‘some people who felt they hadn't met me enough, so abstained [from voting]’. Four participants describe the impact of helpful discussion among members as ‘fair and valid’ (Danni) and integral to a slow process of discernment shown in ‘well-organised Q&A sessions’ and by providing ‘space to share my story’ (Fay). The most affirming part of Baptist discernment practice was voting for a candidate which were mostly ‘positive’ (Amy) and with a ‘higher percentage than I had in mind’ (Danni) and was found to be ‘encouraging’ in the end by Gail. Recognising a call to ministry from well-known member was found to be a more positive experience by participants than being received as a relatively unknown person as a minister in a new church.

***Being a ‘test-case’ and ‘stereotyping’***

As Project Violet indicated, participants in this study also experienced similar effects of being a test case and stereotyping, as such Baptists face similar issues to the women other denominations and in general management. Most of the women who participated in this study have been a test case as the first female minister called by their church. Across seven participants experiences, 12 appointments were as the first female minister of a church and five as the second appointed female minister in the history of each local Baptist church. While some participants experienced stereotyping initially (Belinda), this was particularly around baking as Danni shared: ‘that I will bake for any and all occasions’. Others like Catherine found: ‘Some people were expecting me to be doing more pastoral work, putting on social events, and interested in children/youth rather than thinking through vision and strategy or preaching’. In a similar way, Gail felt that her congregation thought she would be ‘a pushover’. Participants found that the expectations of congregations could lean towards women as social organisers or caregivers to younger people, with less ability towards developing strategy. Moreover, Ella identified that she encountered significant stereotyping where ‘my age was commented on, should I want more children and my marital status was checked’. Liz Graveling (2015) argues that women in the Church or England experience the same pressures as participants in this study. She also connects similar pressures relating to gender and management as women in the workplace in particular with discrimination and social roles (p.2) using the work of Kanter (1977). However, she also highlights a particular issue for female ministers where churches seem to accept female ministry, but Graveling suggests: ‘it is possible that stereotyping and indirect discrimination (whether based on theology or otherwise) exist as barriers to leadership’ (2015, p. 8). This effect is otherwise known as the ‘stained glass ceiling’ (Sullins, 2000). The Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) Settlement guide could be significant for churches in order to recognise barriers to entry for women to ministerial appointments. In a comprehensive section regarding discrimination and gender it states:

We make assumptions about the qualities of a candidate based on our deep-seated beliefs about gender roles. This can happen even when we believe we are open to a minister of either gender. We may assume that men and women will bring certain, different, but stereotypical qualities to the role without exploring whether this is true of any one candidate (p. 22).

In light of these reflections, and alongside the TRR 4 recommendations for diversity training in churches, I suggest that the use of the settlement guide across every region in BUGB would be a productive start to a journey of change in regard to stereotyping for female ministers.

***Jennings’ Self-sufficient man***

There are echoes of female ministers’ experiences within my research on general discernment at the Church Meeting where I show that members who are different to the historic norm of the church experience barriers to attendance in discernment (Moriarty, 2024). I suggest that Willie Jennings’ exploration of the theology student as the self-sufficient man may show why female ministers who are different to the historic expectations of ministers can face barriers in settlement at the Church Meeting. Throughout *After Whiteness*, Jennings critiques theological education for the production of what Jennings names the ‘self-sufficient man’. He is an image of the perfect student by which all other students are trained to become and assessed against, he has a command of ancient languages and has undergone the rigour of theological training offered only in Europe (2020, p. 59). Using Edward Schillebeeckx's essay; ‘Secular Criticism of Christian Obedience and the Christian reaction to that criticism’, Jennings suggests that Schillebeeckx recognised the presence of the self-sufficient man and argued his existence was rooted in both Hellenistic and Roman visions of humanity’s grandeur in which humility is not admired (2020, p. 30). Schillebeeckx highlighted that Aristotle ‘expresses a supreme disdain for every form of servile subjection’ [[1]](#footnote-1) (1980, p. 168) and that the ‘Greek saw Christian obedience as a direct attack against man’s grandeur’ (Ibid, p. 171). Jennings states that this vision is in direct contrast to ‘the God of the Christians [who] was a crucified slave who cried and prayed to God for help, not a self-sufficient man’ (2020, p. 31). In theological education, Jennings shows the unhelpful presence of the self-sufficient man in design, fragments, motions and buildings that limit participation of those who are not White men.

Jennings shows that this approach limits who can excel in the academy, moreover it ensures that theological students continue to be White and male and in turn I suggest who is also found to be a typical minister of a Baptist church which sets the expectations of churches for male ministers in settlement. While Jennings primary focus is on racism experienced within theological education, his analysis of the root of disparity between students can also be seen in female ministerial experiences as Jennings himself highlights with the story of Margaret, a Black female student he had hoped would minister in a large church nearby when she graduated but instead the deacons decided to ‘go with the brother’ as two women on the appointment committee had said ‘something about not being ready for a woman’ (2020, p. 94). As Baptists, such changes require a renewed model of discernment such as slow wisdom. By using slow wisdom, the design of the church meeting is altered by listening to different voices and being attentive to the gifts that unexpected people – such as female ministers - bring in order to discover the humility of Christ’s presence in discernment.

In terms of the role of the Church Meeting, Baptists can celebrate the largely positive environment in which women are able to discern a call to ministry but there is further work to be completed in regarding to discrimination shown in stereotyping in settlement for which the present Baptist Union settlement guide should be helpful to churches. In addition, if the Church Meeting adopts slow wisdom as a discernment model in the settlement stage of appointing a minister, through listening and attending to one another, a more satisfactory experience might be achieved. Little Tew and Cleveley offered Baptists a courageous commitment to the leading of God in their context, likewise through changing discernment practice in relation to settlement Baptists can step towards a more inclusive future.

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1. Jennings cites Aristotle (*Nichomachean Ethics,* 1124b, 20-1125a). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)