

Project Violet Podcast – Season 3, Episode 2

Season 3 Intro

	Music
Jane	Hello, I'm Jane Day, Community Learning Tutor at Regent's Park College, Oxford.
Helen	And I'm Helen Cameron, Research Fellow at the Centre for Baptist Studies at Regent's Park College Oxford. Together we were the co-leaders of Project Violet.
Jane	Welcome to Season 3 of the Project Violet podcast. Project Violet was a research project investigating women's experiences in ministry whilst developing women ministers. It worked to understand better the theological, missional and structural obstacles women ministers face and identify ways forward.
Helen	The research phase of the Project ended in January 2025. Currently stakeholders across Baptist life are implementing the commitments to action that they made in October 2024. Jane and I are now focusing on the academic dissemination of the Project. In this third season we wanted to catch up with some of the work that has been going on since last October.
Jane	We hope that listening to these episodes will help you engage with some of the outcomes of the project.

Helen Cameron

Today, I'm delighted to welcome the Reverend Claire Nichols and the Reverend Brian Nichols to the Project Violet podcast. I think the first daughter and father to appear on the podcast. Welcome.

Claire and Brian

Hello. Hello.

Helen Cameron

We're going to be talking about the resources you have developed to help churches with settlement, the process of appointing a new minister. But before we talk about that, it would be great to find out some more about you both. So Claire, can you start by telling us what your current role is.

Claire Nicholls

So I am a regional minister for London Baptists and as part of that, I look after churches in Southeast London, and I oversee the London Baptist justice hub.

Helen Cameron

Great and Brian, you're retired now, I understand, but what were you doing before retirement?

Brian Nicholls

Well before I retired, I was pastor at South Parade, now called Cornerstone Baptist Church in Leeds. And then before that, Regional Minister, and then before that, Superintendent for the West Midlands area of the Baptist Union.

Helen Cameron

Thank you. So I guess people are also interested in finding out how people come to be Baptist ministers. So Claire, perhaps we can start with you. What was your journey into Baptist ministry?

Claire Nicholls

So I think I've told my story before on the podcast in the last season, so I'm going to do a short version. I first felt called to ministry at university when I was on a Christian Union leadership training weekend, and I read Isaiah 6 in my tent. And I felt at that point that God was calling me to something more, and I didn't need to worry about not being good enough, because he made me good enough and he wanted me to do what he wants me to do, what he's calling me to do. And the long story short is that I explored what that could be for a while, and then I had different roles in church, and I worked as a maths teacher, but throughout that time, people kept on saying to me, perhaps you're called to something more. Perhaps ministry might be the way forward. And I was like, 'No', but I wrote down every time, and my journals at that time were full of that, and I took up the call to preach. But God kept on niggling at me, through other people, through what I read. And there was a point where it got to where I knew that it was the right time to explore it completely. And that was about 10 years later when Pat Took was speaking at Baptist Assembly, and her sermon basically told me to get on with it, so I had to, and the rest really is history.

Helen Cameron

Thank you very much, Brian, what was your story?

Brian Nicholls

Well, I became a Christian when I was a child, and we used to go to the Keswick convention every year, and it was when I was 15 in the missionary meeting at Keswick, I suddenly just knew that I had to go into some kind of full time Christian ministry. And so then it was a question of following that through A' levels and on to higher education. So I went to Northern College straight from school, having got my A' levels, and then from there, straight into my first pastorate, a group of three churches in Derbyshire in 1973. I was only 22 at the time. So and. It was quite a trauma for everybody else, if not just for me. And yeah, so the rest of the time I've done any work, it's been as a minister over the years.

Helen Cameron

Thank you. Now, Claire, you're one of the co researchers in Project Violet, and as you say, you've spoken about that in the previous series, but can you just recap for us what your involvement in Project Violet was.

Claire Nicholls

So I was part of the millennial group, right at the top of the millennial group, kind of beyond millennial. But I was my research was reflecting on the development of the London Baptist women's justice group as part of the London Baptist justice hub. As that was written up I embarked on the journey into regional ministry. And I took on responsibility for justice in the association. So I've also,

I've been leading the Project Violet response for London Baptist as well. And so it's all been part of my journey, as well as being a bit of research.

Helen Cameron

Thank you. Now you've responded to the request for change that was made in the project to develop guidance for the settlement process and to support the role of regional ministers in settlement. Now, for any of our listeners who are not part of the UK Baptist family. Can you just explain settlement and how it works? Claire, do you want to start on that?

Claire Nicholls

So the settlement process is about discerning the future ministry of both ministers and churches, and it brings churches and ministers together to explore what God is calling them to and whether God is calling them to work together. It's a discernment process, and Baptist Union churches put together a profile, and it goes on what kind of church they are, what kind of ministry they're looking for, and it goes on a pastoral vacancy list. Accredited ministers do their own profile, which is a series of set questions, and then they explore the pastoral vacancy list, and they apply to the churches that God might be kind of hinting it might be a good place to look, that's the hope, anyway. And they apply directly the regional ministers help to guide that process a little bit. And if churches believe it's the right minister, they invite them to meet with them and go through a process of interviews and preaches, and that ends with a preach with a view in a special church meeting that discusses, whether the Minister is the right person, and then has a vote to call the minister or not. It's all about discerning the mind of Christ, but we're very aware that we're only human, and sometimes our humanity comes into this. Well, always it does, and that's where it can be difficult.

Helen Cameron

Brian, have you got any reflections on your experience of helping churches through this process? From your experience as a regional minister?

Brian Nicholls

Well, my experience is quite old now, and the system has changed. So there's more... It's the wrong word, really, but power in the hands of the local church and the ministers and the sense of guidance from a regional perspective, again, it's not the right word, but it's kind of weakened, as far as I see it, because in the in the old regime, it was very much in my hands as a superintendent to guide churches clearly towards certain kinds of people. And so releasing names to churches got came through me, generally speaking. I think my more recent experience has been as a moderator for ... I've been involved with four churches. The two that I'm involved with now are unlikely to call a minister in any near future because they're quite small. But the two previous ones were sort of medium size. And my experience there was that, again, we were very much dependent on what the regional ministers sent in our direction. And we had to be very clear in our own minds, in the in the churches involved, as to what we actually wanted. And there was a talk about, well, if we could advertise, we don't need the association. We don't need the Union, but I found that actually, when we tried that route, we ended up with all sorts of also random individuals who wanted to come from the far reaches of the globe and so on, and it wasn't particularly helpful. I think we needed a bit more firm guidance from the regional team. I think I got that right in my head, whether it's come out right is another matter.

Helen Cameron

No. Thank you for those reflections and so very understandably, given the experience that both of you bring to it, you decided to collaborate on developing some resources. Claire, can you start by talking about the resources that you've developed?

Claire Nicholls

So one of the things that came out of Project Violet was that women don't always have a really good experience in settlement. Sometimes they do, but sometimes they don't. They can be asked unhelpful questions, and churches assume that they're open to women in ministry, but when it comes to it, there are entrenched views that come out that are unhelpful sometimes, and we've had stories recently of views coming out in the special church meeting after they've preached with a view. And it's been quite a contentious meeting. And it's sent the church into a difficult place, and we've had to deal with that, and we've heard of women being explored by churches as their minister, but then someone says, 'Oh well, they're a test case to see if we'll have a woman', and it shouldn't be like that. So I recognize the need that for something to be done with churches and settlement to help them not to get to that point where it comes out in that way. And I read Brian's response to Project Violet, the Project Violet report, and it had in there, he talked about a resource that he'd used to help explain a biblical egalitarian argument for women in ministry, and what to do if church members disagreed, because sometimes the churches are open, but they can't articulate why. And a resource like that is really helpful, and it helps individual church members to think through their ideas. So I don't know whether you want to talk about that.

Brian Nicholls

Yes, I think things that that come to me are that you needed to start the conversation about accepting women early on in the process, so that by the time you got to meeting prospective ministers that a lot of the issues had been ironed out. I think I did become aware that some of the things that felt like they were specific to the challenges women faced were actually also challenges for other groups within ministerial candidates, and what one of the things was that if you had anything attached to you that was slightly unusual, you were probably going to struggle to get churches to meet you, for example, if your surname didn't sound English, or if you hadn't got a family, or if you had got a family and there were too many of them, or if you were of a different ethnic background from the majority, that was a challenge, and if your theology was different from the kind of mainstream understanding that people would have, then all of these things could be quite big hindrances in getting churches even to look at the profile of a person. So I think I recognize there's a particular issue for women, but I think it's also difficult for a lot of other people too, and so we need to keep working out a kind system that starts the conversation about who is and isn't eligible early on. I think one of the other things when I prepared stuff for the West Midlands was that we needed to make sure that we were taking this from a thoroughly biblical position. It couldn't just be an emotional response that was seeking to give people a leg up, as it were, but the arguments had to be made very, very firmly from biblical perspective, because the churches that were most likely to object to women in ministry thought that their stance was based on a biblical position, and that includes taking the passages that appear to forbid women from ministry and facing them head on, not just shrugging them off with 'Well, that was cultural', but 'let's see how that fits. Into the overall theology of a church'. And I found that sort of exercise was actually very, very helpful, but you're talking about a generational shift for people. If they've always believed that women can't be ministers, then they're going to go on believing that for a long time to come, even if intellectually, they say, 'Well, I get the point now'. Yeah, so it's got to be worked out thoroughly, really, and to be prepared for disappointment when churches just don't get it, in which case you go back and you start again.

Helen Cameron

And so how did you collaborate together then to decide what to produce and to actually produce it?

Claire Nicholls

So I asked Brian to send me his original document, which he searched out and he found, and I worked through it, and I developed that into a settlement guide for churches that are in settlement

to consider the biblical egalitarian argument for women in ministry. I added a bit of the history of London Baptists and women in ministry and the Baptist union as well into there, and some top tips for how to treat women in settlement as well. From the experiences that have been shared with me, I explored with the regional team about how we might get this out to churches and also to appeal to the kind of churches we're trying to target. So I go to a church that's never had a woman minister, but would say that they are open to women ministry, but are quite conservative in theology. So I shared the resource with the minister to see what he thought as a very supportive minister in this and he brought his thoughts to it as well. And then I put this resource together and sat with it for a while, and then at the Project Violet symposium at the beginning of the year, Ruth Moriarty presented a paper on the experiences of women Baptist ministers in London in settlement, and she expressed the need for some kind of resource that would help guide churches through the settlement process in a way that treated women well. So I met with her, and we began to expand on what I'd written to resource the churches more fully. And then, meanwhile, I met with Jane Day, and she said that the church where she was a member at the time, Crown Road Baptist Church in South Croydon, they were doing a sermon series on women in ministry. In response to Project Violet. So I contacted the minister there, David Rogers, and he kindly shared his notes, and that fitted in with what had been written in Brian's paper. And so I rejigged that a little bit, and I developed it into a sermon series that follows that egalitarian argument in the settlement guide. And the idea that sermon series is it could be used pre-empting the settlement process so or before the minister even leaves, so they can set them up for what comes next. And then Ruth Moriarty, in the meanwhile, drew on her PhD research on slow wisdom and discerning the mind of Christ at church meetings, and she wrote a resource for church meetings for the start of the search to address the stuff that Brian was just talking about, about exploring it first, about the kind of ministry you're looking for, and who, who that what that Minister might look like, and then one for the special church meeting, when the vote to the call the minister happens or not, because that's when some of the explosive stuff happens. And that could be used for all the other points of differences, actually, that we've just talked about, that are in the search for a minister, and so that's it became a bigger resource than I first expected it to be. But one of the issues that we have is, how do we get people to engage with the resource? How do we get churches to do that? Because in the Baptist setup, change only comes when the churches change. It comes from the ground up. And so we need to be able to address it in the churches and not just in the institution level. And so it's not quite we've got a little bit more planned with the resource. So we're going to do an introductory video as well to help engage with that. But that's not happened yet. But throughout the resource, there's all sorts of links to books and online resources to help equip churches further in this area as well, so they can dig as deep as they want to. They can just do the surface stuff, and some churches are just ready for this. And they're fine with women in ministry, and it's okay, but that being helpful for them to look at it. But then some churches do need to dig deeper, and we as a regional team would help with that. It's kind of the message in there as well. So that's kind of how it all came together.

Helen Cameron

That's amazing. Well, I think speaking as one of the co-leaders of Project Violet, that is so exciting to hear the way in which, I think the Spirit was speaking to different people and was drawing out different contributions. And Claire, you've been able to curate them and bring them together and draw upon different people's efforts. And that's exactly the kind of, I guess, collaborative response which we were really hoping for to Project Violet. So it's been really exciting to hear you describe that. As we've gone through the conversation, you've highlighted the fact that you're working from an egalitarian position. Are there any particular ideas or principles that either of you feel you're trying to get across in this material, which it would be helpful to highlight here.

Brian Nicholls

My perspective is that I want people to have a well rounded understanding of the nature of ministry and the call to ministry and so on and so I think that one of the things is that the questions that Project Violet has raised are the kind of questions that also affect other areas of our understanding of ministry. I think Baptists have often been quite muddled up, and they've sort of gone from, well, it's the ministry of the Body of Christ, and we all have a place in that to the ordained ministry is really important. And don't dare lay hands on anybody in case something electric happens and all that sort of thing. And so it needs to be in that sort of more well rounded setting. One of the things that just struck me as Claire was talking was that in Leeds, where the church had come from, a very traditional view of male headship and so on. That's where the material was really most helpful as it as it was being developed. I drew a lot from what Ernie Wally had done up in Yorkshire, and it didn't help us through the process of settlement of other team members, but it helped us to address attitudes within the church generally about women and men. The egalitarian thing is interesting, because I found that some people were able to reconcile conflicting ideas by saying, Well, of course, if we have teams of people, then you can have a husband and a wife, and the husband can be the head of the wife, and then she can minister, and that felt very unsatisfactory often when the woman was far better than the man at doing that, that job. Yes, I'm not quite sure what I'm trying to say in all of that, but I think, I think it's quite, quite a tangled sort of web that we work our way through with this.

Helen Cameron

I think that's really helpful. One of the things that came across to me during the course of the project is that people often present egalitarian and complementarian positions, as if they're a simple either/or - a simple binary. But actually, when you start to get under the surface, there are shades in both positions which come to the surface as people start to talk about what they really believe and what they would like to see happen. And so I think the value of a resource like this is it's more nuanced than that, and can help people really get to the bottom of what it is that they believe and what they want to want to see. Is there anything else? Claire, that you Oh, sorry, Brian.

Brian Nicholls

I think one of the things that we might have to live with is that there are stages in this, and we might get a church or an individual minister or whoever, a little way along the track and celebrate that little victory, and then build on that and so on it. There are situations where we you won't get change all in one great lump. And so sometimes the headship argument, there are sort of stages on the way where we can just about live with that having and having opened that one up, then you begin to go into the next thing. One of the things I found in Leeds, which was really quite difficult, was that the university Christian Unions, and there were four of them operating in Leeds. And the universities were obviously following the complementarian route. Celebrated the theology of people like Wayne Grudem, and that was influencing as fast as we were opening things up in in South Parade, we're also having this other wind blowing that was taking us backwards, and that's quite a challenge. And I don't know how that can be resolved, because it's, it's beyond, beyond the reach of the denomination, as it were.

Helen Cameron

Yeah, these things are all done in the context, aren't they? Yeah, Claire, are there any other things that you want to say about what the ideas are that you're trying to get across,

Claire Nicholls

I think, just on the what we've just talked about? One of the things in the guide that Brian wrote about was about complementarianism and about the body of the church and complementary gifts within the body of church, whether male or female. Actually, it's about bringing people together

with complementary gifts, and that's what complementarianism about. Is not about gender. It's about making sure you've got the right people in the team to balance that team out. And I am a great believer in women and men co-working for the Kingdom. It's not just about one or the other. It's about working together. But it doesn't have to be husband and wife, because you don't need covering, which is often how people see it. I think the key ideas that I want to get across that are probably a bit more practical about how churches should not be tested in their theology as part of the settlement process, and it needs to be something that they're thinking about all the way through, rather than just in that in that moment when they're thinking about their next minister. Because a minister can influence the theology of the church through their preaching, through who they are. And you do find when the minister leaves, then, then the church is finding itself again. And what, what do we want to take from that ministry? Because we're not in the image of the minister, in the image of God. So what do we want to take from that ministry? And what do we take forward? And theology can be deconstructed at time of the interregnum, as well as constructed. So, so it's about working that through before you even get there, and recognizing that it's not all about the person. It's about the body and what the body believes. It's really important. And the other thing is, I've done a little bit of research into Maria Living Taylor, who was one of the first women Baptist ministers, and she was in London in Barking. And when her husband was called to Barking Baptist Church, John Living Taylor, he asked, Will you allow my wife, not any woman, my wife, to preach in the pulpit? And the deacon said, Well, we let women sing in the pulpit, so why not preach? And they just assumed that the church would find that acceptable. And it turns out, in the end, that the church meeting didn't. And this, this exploring of theology, has got to go beyond the leadership. It's got to go to the membership, because that's where the problems come when the membership realize that the leadership are trying to take them in a direction they didn't know they were in. So they need to make sure they do that, and that problem is over 100 years old, and we should be better by now.

Helen Cameron

Thank you for giving us that historical context, and again, just celebrating those early pioneer women and all that they've brought to Baptist life. Moving on now and thinking about the issue you raised before about making these resources available. Can you just say how they're currently available, and then anything that you're doing or want to do to make them more widely available?

Claire Nicholls

They're currently on the London Baptist website. In the 'what we do' section. There's a section called resources for justice, and there's a women in ministry section in there, and you can browse the resources online, or you can download them. We've also shared them with the regional team, with our district ministers. We have a local ministers who look after ministers, kind of in a layer with the regional ministers. And I've also tested them with some London ministers. As I've said already, they've been shared, I think they've been shared with the Regional Minister Team Leaders. So they've gone beyond London as well, although they are London centric, and we're going to do in the coming weeks and months. It's a fuller launch once we've got our video done and share them with the churches who are in settlement, all of them, not just one or two that we've decided to and the moderators of the churches and others as well. So we're trying to get it out there, and we'll keep talking about it, and we hope that the churches will engage with that.

Helen Cameron

Brilliant, is it too early to ask whether there been any reaction to the material?

Claire Nicholls

I think generally, it's been received well, but I'd love to hear stories of people using the material.

Helen Cameron

Okay, well, that's an open invitation to keep that feedback loop going. That's great. So your hope, it sounds as if your hope is that churches, who sort of know that settlements coming up will engage good and early with these resources. Is that what you're hoping for?

Claire Nicholls

Yes, yes, yeah.

Helen Cameron

And you suggest that people browse them, download them. What would be a first step if people have gone online and looked at this? What would you suggest would be the first way into making use of them?

Claire Nicholls

I think, read the settlement guide first, that's the main document, and then get and then engage with the questions in there, with the leadership team and the churches and the members as well. And don't, not assuming you know what the members think, but also, if a minister knows they're looking at leaving, even if they haven't taught their church yet, consider preaching through it as well, and looking at resource in advance because of it. Often the ministers can be the biggest advocates for women in ministry, but what the who they when the church is left behind, they don't realize the importance of that, and to engage with them before and at the beginning of the process is really, really important, not when people realize that there's a problem.

Helen Cameron

Great. Thank you very much. I guess the final question is, how do you hope this is going to contribute to the purposes of Project Violet?

Brian Nicholls

I think that when the conversation needs to keep going on, I think one of the things we need to be wary of is if we rely too much on material that's produced and it's kind of there with there's the information. Get on and read it. It's actually, I think there's a heart shift that has to take place in people so that emotionally as well as intellectually, they're able to grasp what ministry is about, and that affects both men and women. I think one of the challenges that I've found when I was a regional person is that I could write screeds and screeds about things. I could try my hardest to make it accessible and so on. But if somebody sees a sheet of writing, they go, Yeah, whatever. And they don't really read it properly, and it's actually the living experience of meeting good women ministers who get on with the job without fuss and favor and that sort of thing that really helps the cause. My opening up personally was that we had a member of our church in Nottingham before I became a regional minister, who was clearly called to ministry, but she'd always been told she couldn't be it wasn't possible. She came from a Welsh background that was very traditional, and there was a point where I knew that if she was going to make any progress at all, I had to give her the means to do that. So I'm wrestling with all sorts of questions in my mind about how this this works. But the thing was that when she preached, she was a far better preacher than I was, and her pastoral skills were superb, far better than me, who is extremely clumsy when it comes to some of the pastoral stuff. And it was basically that lived experience of seeing somebody else in action that helped me to say it's fine. This is what we do. This is how we are as God's people. You don't need to worry about who's in charge and all those kind of things. Yeah. So I think that's the important thing. It's how people are within the whole debate, not just what's fed to them by way of information.

Helen Cameron

Any resource is only as good as the conversation that follows it. And I think you've really emphasized that, Claire, in the way in which you've spoken about it, you want to see this as a springboard for conversations. Is there anything else you want to add, Claire, about how you hope this will fulfill some of the purposes of Project Violet.

Claire Nicholls

Well, I've always seen Project Violet is something that's not just for making the experiences of women better, but actually making the experience of the whole church better. And my hope in in this, in bringing this, is it will help churches to not only explore how they treat women, but how they treat all of the people that they meet, and that we won't hear the stories of people being treated differently because of their gender, because of their race, because of their background, and that at the moment, in the settlement system, there's two there's two sections to the profile, and they're meant to look at the second section afterwards, so they can't tell if they're a woman or if they're from a different country. And it, and it works some way, but it doesn't really and so I hope that this resource will help go beyond that and begin to kind of change that culture of unconscious bias that is within the settlement system that we see every day when we meet with churches. And I think that that speaks into what Project Violet is trying to do.

Helen Cameron

Thank you. Thank you, Claire and Brian, for sharing your insights.

Season 3 Outro

Helen	Thank you for listening to this episode of the Project Violet podcast.
Jane	We invite you to go to the website if you want to learn more about the Project. www.projectviolet.org.uk
	Music