

Project Violet Podcast – Season 3 – Episode 5

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.
Jane	In this episode we are delighted to welcome Ken Benjamin as guest presenter. Ken is a Baptist minister and Director of Church Relationships at the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity.
Helen	Ken offered to engage with the issue of women's experience of leading larger Baptist churches.

Ken Benjamin

Welcome back. This is part two of our Project Violet podcast looking at the challenges and opportunities for women as team leaders or senior ministers of larger Baptist churches. If you haven't listened to part one, Episode 4, I suggest you do that first. I found Lisa Holmes Ali Summers and Ellen Wild's thoughts and contributions inspiring and challenging. I hope you will too as we go straight into part two, I start with a question for all of them.

Ken Benjamin

When I was part of the Network, that you're a core leader of Ellen, the Larger Baptist Church Network, which is particularly the team leaders of those larger churches, we sometimes said that in leading a larger church, there's an area where you're particularly responsible, particularly able and particularly vulnerable. So you're particularly responsible because you know, it's a misquote of the verse 'Those to whom much has been given, much has been required'. Because that probably refers to being given the gospel message. But there is that sense in which, as in terms of the talents that we've been given, in the number of people in the church, we are particularly responsible. There's things we can do, as we've said already, but then we are particularly able, because you can, you can then have a go at some things, like we said, but particularly vulnerable. Maybe people feel freer to criticize us in a larger church and the other churches in the town, or maybe under spiritual attack in certain ways. I don't know. So does that resonate particularly responsible, particularly able, particularly vulnerable and is there a particular female aspect to that, or is that just general to anybody who leads a larger church? Anybody jump in on any of those thoughts?

Ali Summers

Well, we're clearly all particularly able. That's why we're on this call, isn't it?

That's a hard question, isn't it? Really? Yeah, I am. I think there is, I feel very cautious in saying this. I think you need particular competencies for particular roles, and I think some people are particularly competent to lead in urban deprivation situations, and I think that I would be entirely hopeless, you know. So I think it's perhaps you do need some particular skills or particular personality traits that enable you to lead within a larger context, because it does require some different things of you than leading in a smaller context. But I wouldn't want to stack them against each other. They're just they're just different. The vulnerability piece, I suspect, is somewhat about personality, and I think that I'm someone who carries stuff quite a lot in my head and feels responsible for kind of literally everything, all of the time if I'm not careful. And I think my vulnerability is then in that the bigger the amount of people or projects that you've got, the less you are able to do that, and so that feels sometimes quite like a weight. I but I think that's a lot about how I am, how I'm wired, my personality type, what's important to me. And I think the vulnerabilities come into the spaces where I am vulnerable, but they might be different for Ellen and Lisa, and they might be different for you Ken and I tend to avoid stereotypes, but, you know, it may be women have a tendency. I mean, we sort of say our women don't. You know, men are good at putting things in boxes and compartmentalizing them. I don't think that's necessarily the truth. I think different men are different but, but maybe there is a tendency towards more men being better at doing that, and women tend to sort of juggle more stuff and have it all in their head all the same time. And maybe that's a bit of a vulnerability, but I'm happy to be corrected on that.

Lisa Holmes

I would say that there are definite differences to leading, leading in the larger context, again, not better or worse, just different. The whole budget thing and finance, then budgets and more salaries or stipends, or however you do it that you're responsible for. So, you know, I sometimes think, gosh, if you know, if it all goes wrong and I mess it all up, it's not just me and my life. It's, it's the staff, you know, it's that. So there's that sense of, yeah, there are different skills involved, I guess, in leading in, leading in that, in that bigger way, and that then there is a vulnerability in that which you carry. Whether, for me, I wouldn't see that as female or male. I would just see that as different personalities, different characteristics, different skills of and I think I can't remember who, who it was now? Was it Ken Blanchard, or someone like that, who talked about being called to be a leader of 10 or a leader of 50, or a leader of 100 or 500 or a leader of 1000 or whatever? And we're all called. We're called to

lead at different contexts. And, and I think, yeah, there are definite challenges that go with whatever context it is, but certainly that larger context, I would say, the financial burden of an organization, which you don't always learn beforehand. You know, you learn it when you get there and you have to work.

Ellen Wild

I've often, I have often felt the weight of the kind of those to whom much is given, much is expected thing, you know I'm just blessed with a brilliant, giving, generous, well-resourced church in in time and energy and money in every way. And I am the person people are looking to steward that and lead people in the stewarding of that. So I do think we, I think we are particularly able in some ways, larger churches can, as you say, and therefore also particularly vulnerable, and for all the joy there is in leading the team, I identify so much Ali that I also lead the team in every way. So I did not go to Spurgeon's and learn about HR and contracts and all of that stuff. But with my staff, and all the issues it raises, and all those things and carrying the burden for wanting them to flourish. You know, I love to cheer them on, and I really want that so much, but, but I carry it like Lisa does. Do you wonder if one of the questions is the particularly female aspects, not necessarily to do with just preferences or temperament, but just because we are women. It just can be more lonely. So I just don't have many peers doing what I am doing to talk to about things, just because there aren't many of us so and I do spend almost all of my time in in in entirely or prominently male dominated spaces. You know, it's just the way it is. Absolutely, I don't mind it. It's become kind of normal to me. I don't worry about it particularly. But actually, if I look at it, I think, Gosh, I spend all my time with men and in terms of kind of friendships and support and that actually that's hard. That's just harder to find, isn't it? If you're asking, is there a vulnerability for us as women leading in larger churches, I wonder if, if that might be one of them.

Ken Benjamin

In finding the three of you to talk to each other, you're not geographically close.

Lisa Holmes

I would definitely agree with that. And that's where it is really helpful to find other women in leadership and that way you can just give courage to each other and encourage one another and support one another and pray for one another. And because I, yeah, I would agree, I think that is one of the vulnerabilities that is quite lonely. And I've noticed you go to the States, I've had the privilege of being able to go to the States and see some of the churches in the States, and usually, unless they already know the relationship you're assumed to be the wife of a minister. It's not even considered that you might be leading a larger church and that you know those sort of assumptions that made when you join something that is church leaders and men and that you're just assumed that you're probably the spouse. Yes, it's there.

Ali Summers

Yeah, I think, I think that's a really, really good point. I mean, all of them are, and I'm so used to being just with men in the room that I scarcely even notice. People make a comment, and I'm like, oh, yeah, it's just, this is my life. I'm completely acclimatized in my life, but I think that vulnerability around am I going to have to give account for myself is, is a really subtle kind of thing that can erode you over time. Which is, you know, how many more times do I have to say, oh, no, actually, I'm the team leader. When I was at Skipton and my associate there was brilliant, and so many new people who came to the church would assume that he was obviously the senior leader, and every occasion he would correct them. But you know that not everybody has as much integrity to do that, or feels that they are going to do it. And,

and just having to kind of stand there and deal with that so many times, or, you know, being that wife or the administrator, and even now, you know, it's just like, Am I allowed to be in this room? Am I allowed to share this Bible passage? You know, there's huge stuff that goes on inside me every time that I have to deal with that, which is at least once a week. Probably there's vulnerability in that of going eventually, I just can't do this anymore because it's eroded something of my sense of self esteem and my own sense of calling, which is pretty reasonable. But you know, when that happens time and time again, that's quite hard.

Ken Benjamin

There's a there's a huge challenge in what you've said for the for the rest of us. I haven't just asked you, because you're the three I know, but because you're the only ones. You've led thriving churches. You led churches where, or are leading churches where there's Kingdom growth, where people are finding Jesus and growing in Jesus, where there are baptisms, where there are signs of kingdom life, so many things. So you're not just holding the fort here you are doing a lot with a lot that you have been given.

Just having this conversation is proof that this is doable to anybody listening, which I guess leads us to our third question. So if we've done yay and nay, you can come back to those if you wish. But I'm going to ask Ellen to kick us off with May, what do you wish would happen? What's your prayer? Maybe, for those who are listening, maybe the next generation take it in any direction you want. Ellen.

Ellen Wild

I guess my hope, my prayer, is that that we don't do more podcasts like this, because it is just the norm. It is so the norm, and that that attrition that Lisa has described is not people's experience any longer and that perhaps the shift I think I'm seeing that I mentioned at the beginning, in terms of people wanting different leadership styles would take hold in such a way that people don't think, Well, women are second Ministers and they're the pastoral ones, or whatever, actually what we really need, and the people who lead our organization is somebody who's got this kind of emotional intelligence, perhaps, who can lead a team and really believe in in the team and so on. So yeah, my hope and my prayer is for a sea change, and then this becomes the norm. That's like a kind of longer term may. But my short-term hope is that, just as you say, Ken, that more women would just realize this is possible. You know, I just want to say, I am the kind of person who would count myself out. I'm quite surprised that I'm here doing this and if I can, you can. I've been single in ministry, and it's possible. I have been married in ministry, and it is possible. I've had babies and been on maternity leave from my church and come back and had tiny kids and had teenagers and it's possible. So I've done it every step. And now I'm in a larger church, and it is possible. So my longer-term hope and prayer is for a massive sea change, and that this is just not a conversation. My short-term hope is that if people are listening and they're thinking, could I, or I thought I couldn't, that they hearing us saying, well, she thought she couldn't, and she did, and it's okay, and it's great in loads and loads of ways. So my May is that someone listening, says, I could do that. If they can do that, I can do that.

Ken Benjamin

Great. Wow. Amazing. Lisa, Ali, anything to add?

Lisa Holmes

I think Ellen's summarized it all, really, I just echo everything that Ellen's just said. And I guess I want to just pray for anyone listening, and into the future as well, in the big picture that we have generations of women just discovering and exploring their calling. And then,

because it always comes back to that, doesn't it? When you have the hard time, I go back to No, actually, I know God has called me to do this. And if you if you know what your calling is, then there are no ceilings with God. So if that is your calling, then just keep exploring it. Just keep going for it, and don't let anything else become the ceiling, because God doesn't put ceiling on these things. And that's what I know, that's where I've had to come back to, is like, No, this is my calling, and therefore I will put another step forward. And so I just want to pray that for anyone who that might be helpful to.

Ali Summers

Also just a hope that that men would be encouragers and champions. I look back and I was thinking about it because of the podcast, and thinking about the key people who've just encouraged me in a non-patronizing way, you are gifted and called by God, and who've allowed me to step into a space that I might have not done. And so if you're somebody who is hopeful that that women take up the calling of God on their lives in the leadership of churches, then please, will you encourage that to happen? Will you create space for that to happen in a in a way that has integrity? Because that really, really matters, I think, still in this age. So I'd hope for that, really. And my other hope is if this quiet revival is going on, that we're starting to kind of see around us that God is calling younger men and younger women into relationship with him, and there's a huge lost generation to be reached. We need every hands-on deck for that. And in the same way that I think in some of the nations around the world, where there's explosion of evangelism, it's whoever is able and called by God, I kind of hope for that. You know that sometimes, some point we just get over some of these conversations. And just like we need everybody, we need everybody serving God, called by God, using the gifts that they're given, because we need it for the kingdom of God. And that's kind of my hope, really.

Ken Benjamin

Yeah, wow, brilliant. We're recording this over. Zoom. But if it was live and we were all together in one place, and there was a live audience, they would have been clapping and cheering all that you said. But hear that endorsement that they would have been that clapping, because I think your answers have been inspiring and totally challenging as well. And I hope and pray this will be useful, having said that, it would be totally inappropriate if I was the one to close in prayer. I think so if, if any of the three of you, or all of the three of you, want to jump in and pray, maybe picturing, you know, some somebody who is in that next generation and praying for them, jump in however you feel, and then we'll call that the close. Thanks for listening, everyone. We're going to pray.

Lisa Holmes

Father, I want to just thank you for that Genesis mandate, which was for men and women to lead together to fill and be part of bringing the kingdom of heaven in all its fullness. And Lord, we thank You that You have invited us to partner with you in doing that as men and as women and so Lord, we want to pray Lord for anyone who is listening to this, who is just exploring their calling with you. Both men and women. Lord that they would just know that the things that you've called them into the call of God on their lives. Father that you would equip, that you would anoint afresh. Lord that you would make spaces at the table. Lord, we pray for this new generation coming through that that Lord, they would know people like us making space. They would know people who are reaching out at hand and saying, come and come and join us in leadership. In this way, they would find a place that isn't lonely, but is a place to learn and grow, just as we have been able to and Father God, we are so thankful to those that have given us spaces. We are so thankful for those in our journeys, and we pray that for everyone who is listening to this, and particularly those women Lord, who are who know some calling on their lives, but are struggling to work out, can I really do this? Is this

really for me? Father, would you just bring fresh courage and fresh boldness to explore the calling that you have given them step by step as they walk through it in the name of Jesus, Amen.

Ali Summers

Lord, thank you for your grace and mercy to us. Thank you for the awesome privilege of being called to be leaders in your church and to serve people and to care for them, to walk with them through the good times and the very dark valleys. Thank you, Lord for this calling that you've given to each of us here. And Lord, we praise You and we honour you for that, and Lord for those who are uncertain today, I pray that your spirit would be at work in their hearts, Bringing them a deep conviction about your word to them, and that you would give men and women encourage and confidence to follow you the next step and to see you opening the way before them, and to know that you're with them and that the one who calls us is faithful, and he will do it. Thank you, Lord, that you hold us. You hold each one of us in your hands, and you are faithful to us. Thank you, Lord. Amen. Amen, Lord,

Ellen Wild

We do praise you that leading a larger Baptist Church as a woman is entirely possible and doable and can be a privilege and a joy, because when you call you give us what we need, and Lord, we do dare to pray for a continuing sea change in our Baptist family and in the church at large, so that women are released more and more into all the spheres, at every level, in terms of leadership, we pray for young women to be called into ministry who've got years ahead of them to learn and to grow and then potentially to grow into larger churches. We agree and pray for all those uncertain ones listening and wondering, and pray that our words might have been helpful, and we pray that men would continue to cheer on and champion and be brothers to us in our calling. So Lord, thank You for this encouraging, nourishing conversation that it would be a blessing and a help. We pray in Jesus' name amen, amen, amen, amen.

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