

Project Violet Report: Is it easier for a female Baptist minister to flourish as a chaplain in the NHS than in local Baptist churches and trans-local Baptist life?

Introduction

Having trained for ministry at Spurgeon's College between 2006–10 and 2012–13 (long story) it was a huge surprise to find myself pursuing healthcare chaplaincy in the Summer of 2014, only a year into my NAM studies. In hospital chaplaincy I found an almost entirely new context and discipline of ministry, which continues to be a rich and fertile ground for my own development as a minister.

Even in the nine years in which I've been a full-time healthcare chaplain the grounds have shifted both towards a greater sense of articulation of professionalism and professional standards for healthcare chaplains, and towards a more inclusive approach to pastoral, spiritual and religious care which recognises that those coming from non-religious backgrounds are just as capable to fulfil the role of chaplain provided they are able to deal with liturgies and diverse worldviews.

Women in accredited Baptist ministry in Baptists Together account for 23% of the total accredited ministers.¹ Concerning chaplaincy, the best data available is from the Free Churches Group² healthcare chaplains' directory, in which 44% are female and 56% male. Having served both as a church minister and as a hospital chaplain I felt keen to explore, by listening to women who had inhabited both these roles, how their experiences compared and what the challenges were to flourishing in either setting, trying to ultimately reflect on whether women in accredited Baptist ministry are better able to flourish outside of Baptist churches and trans-local Baptist ministry.

I interviewed four female accredited Baptist ministers who had served as both healthcare chaplains and church ministers. I recorded the conversations and these were transcribed before being returned to me, and the following reflections are my response to what they shared with me during those conversations and my reading of the transcripts. I have grouped my thoughts via common themes which came up in the conversations.

Reflections

Access to funding

Despite it being 17 years since I first started training, it still surprised me to hear of women who were being financially shortchanged. Of those I spoke to a number had funded their own training, despite one person's church having paid for the training of previous male students.

¹ <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.baptist.org.uk%2FPublisher%2FFile.aspx%3FID%3D346175&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>

² <https://www.freechurches.org.uk/>

The women I spoke to had limited access to study or development funding – they were more likely to find themselves in smaller churches which squeezed budgets. One person had been paid to work just three days a week but found that the work spread out without real appreciation for how this person's spouse had to subsidise for them to attend BU assembly or regional events, let alone consider a sabbatical.

As chaplains this doesn't improve unless one's employer is willing to pay for travel and attendance. For example, my trust is willing to pay for me to attend our association minister's conference, but I know this is quite rare and if not, I would need to fund it myself.

'Gap-filling'

Relating particularly to during their training, or even before this, more than one of the women I spoke to described male leaders and ministers being reluctant to give them responsibility in leadership in church life. The exception to this was for 'gap-filling' – i.e. no one else can be found to lead X, or to take the service the Sunday after Easter or the August Bank Holiday, therefore on this occasion the woman was asked to do so.

Sometimes different language was used, rather than 'preaching a sermon', it might be called 'giving a talk'.

This harks back to that old scenario I remember being told of where men would say they were only asking a woman because they couldn't find a man to do the job, whatever it was. Although people might no longer use that language it's clear the experience still exists for some, whether it is intentional or not.

Being a 'test case'

Unsurprisingly, one of the most common shared experiences were women dealing with the reactions of those in the church for whom they were the first female minister they had encountered. This included concerns of how X would manage, or whether additional safeguards needed to be kept in terms of pastoral visiting or 1-2-1 meetings. It was clear that these things had not been considered issues when male ministers had been appointed to roles.

It also put pressure on the female ministers to be not simply an individual but an archetype, representing female ministry more broadly and thus being appointed not as an individual but as a trial of female accredited ministry.

Appreciation of the 'real' in chaplaincy

One of the most common areas of agreement within the interviews was the appreciation every person had for the honesty of chaplaincy. This resonated strongly with me too, that in church life it could feel like people were presenting a surface level version of themselves whereas in chaplaincy it felt like people were very honest about how they were doing. Perhaps this was to

do with the role of the chaplain and the likely challenging situations people found themselves in, but even then, it was a stark difference. Those I interviewed described a sense of relief that in chaplaincy no one said they were 'fine' when in fact they were far from it.

This sense of honesty was experienced in both ways – it also led to the female chaplains feeling freer to be themselves and more valued for who they truly were. It meant they too could be more honest about not being fine because they were in a setting where vulnerability was felt to be more valued.

Part of this sense of belonging came from being in a much more female-dominated working environment, where issues which are more likely to affect women, such as menopause, were part of the general conversation.

Personal

One of the areas of church life which also provided commonality between interviews was the way people in the congregations spoke to them about things which they felt were inappropriate. From comments which felt infantilising and controlling, to comments about age, clothing, weight and their personal life. Those I spoke to often felt like people overstepped the boundaries and gave advice or weighed in too readily. There was a sense in which they felt like they were considered public property and as such nothing was off limits. I have also heard male ministers express frustration at this reality.

Appreciation for the diverse in chaplaincy

Another significant area of agreement was for the diversity of chaplaincy in every sense. The women I spoke to enjoyed being part of a bigger workforce and working with people of other disciplines, even saying that they felt their skills (including their pre-ministerial skills) were more valued in these settings than in their church ministry lives, where diversity was not always something which was felt to be celebrated.

This diversity was particularly valued as regards ecumenism and multi-faith and belief, with a gratitude for opportunities to learn about the lives of others and to receive professional respect, honour and encouragement from those in very different traditions, including those who don't support the ordination of women, for example Roman Catholic priest colleagues.

These relationships with those from very different backgrounds provided enriching support to the women I spoke to.

Conclusion

Each of the people I spoke to shared things in common whilst also having unique experiences within the Baptist and healthcare worlds they have been a part of. This sense of seeing their experiences as 'personal' rather than symptomatic of a wider pattern of discrimination may be the greatest commonality of all. With time and experience women learn to see these things, but

particularly in youth or inexperience there is a tendency to assume that it must just be about 'me' rather than the preconceived attitudes and prejudices of those around me.

Just like our male counterparts, all female ministers will have strengths as well as areas of ministry which need to be developed. For women it seems that these things may carry significantly more weight at times, and adding to this a feeling of judgement and a sense of claustrophobia within a church ministry setting can make life feel quite lonely and challenging.

Despite being a small sample there was definitely a shared sense of articulation around the freedom which healthcare chaplaincy had given this cohort of women. Even those who had returned to a church-based role had been able to express the breathing space that a healthcare role had offered, at least initially. It's possible that after a significant time similar dynamics as to how a congregation can come to view a minister might develop with staff, particularly in a small setting such as a hospice, although one might also see this as the broader challenge of integrity which applies to all disciples in a small community where they might be in the minority.

So how might the Baptist family learn from the experience of healthcare chaplains, and what changes might impact the experiences of women in these roles?

There has certainly been acceptance of chaplaincy within our denomination for a significant period. The days of institutional chaplaincy as the sole territory of Anglican priests is, thankfully, long gone. At the same time, we have struggled to articulate a theology of ministry which does not have local church – or churches in the case of regional and national roles – at its heart. At times, even in 2023, we struggle to recognise and make practical room for ministries which are not church based, sometimes even just in the language that we use. Whatever the reasons for this, if more accredited female ministers find themselves in chaplaincy, then they will be disproportionately affected by these oversights.

What then might Project Violet seek to ask for which has been shown up in these conversations?

1. Funding for women who are not funded to attend local, regional or national events.
2. Funding for initial training and for CMD for women who do not receive money from other sources.
3. Funding for sabbaticals.
4. Training for all regional teams, council and those in national roles which explores the barriers to women in Baptist life and the experiences of discrimination women experience in accredited ministry.
5. Recognition of the place of chaplaincy in our Baptist family, through the appointment of someone to lead the denominational understanding and development of chaplaincy roles and be a supportive advocate and link for those working within chaplaincy roles who are accredited by our union.
6. An updated 'Theology of Chaplaincy' to be commissioned following on from the 2012 report (see Additional reading), articulating how chaplaincy relates to one of the four key

areas of work identified by our General Secretary, Lynn Green and the Core Leadership Team³: 'enabling Baptist voices and action in the public square'.

Despite the challenges, women are finding places of encouragement and flourishing across the various roles in which an accredited minister can serve, finding generous colleagues beyond and within our denomination. Whatever the hurdles, it is true to say that female Baptist ministers are not in retreat; we are called by God, we talk to one another, and we want to make sure everybody has a seat at the table. You can like it or lump it, but we're here to stay.

Additional reading

<https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/archive/files/Modern%20Ministry%20combined.pdf>
(Accessed 16th February 2023)

https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/368866/Theology_of_Chaplaincy.aspx (Accessed 15th February 2023)

³ https://baptist.org.uk/Groups/330646/Key_areas_of.aspx