

the baptist ministers'
journal



July 2022 volume 355

Signposts in the Psalms

Simon Hollis

Learning From the Pandemic

Paul Beasley-Murray

**Female Sexuality
in the Christian Tradition II**

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JB

A Chaplain's Perspective

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Of Interest To You

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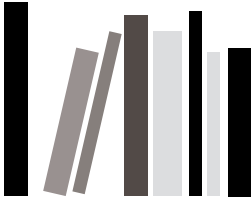
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from the editor

Attention

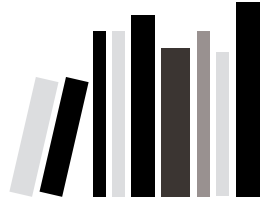
In early June I was fortunate to attend a retreat led by Geoff Colmer, recently both President of the BU and Team Leader of the CBA and also part of the Order for Baptist Ministry. Geoff used music, images and words to encourage us to be truly attentive to our surroundings. To do this, I took a solo walk on a perfect summer afternoon. Normally I would have been striding out and taking in the view—which to be fair was stunning, and worth looking at. However, on this particular afternoon I focused on the things under my nose. I spent 10 minutes watching a grasshopper jump, then rasp its legs in the sun, then hop away. I spent more time tracing the contours of some bracken and wondering whether this primitive plant's forebears were eaten by some kind of giant reptile, long since extinct. I read the dedication on a strategically placed wooden bench and asked myself if anyone would remember me like that when I have gone—but maybe it doesn't really matter, because God will have it all in hand.

Life is made up of very many small things and just a few big ones: that afternoon of attention to the small details was both healing and encouraging, since just for a bit we could all stop looking where we were going and focus on where we were. When I turned round to go back to the centre I found I had hardly covered any distance at all on my walk, but I felt I had been 'away' for hours. May God give us all some space to find joy in small, easy to find, things this summer; and some relief from the bigger challenges of ministry.

In this issue of *bmj* I hope you will find some interesting summer reading, whatever your particular interests might be. Two of our articles were awarded first (Simon Hollis) and second (Amanda Pink) prizes in our Essay Competition 2022 and we are thrilled to have such good reflective early-stage ministers among us. Well done to you both, and to all the others who entered this year—we had some stunning contributions and the judges were pressed to choose. Some of the other entries will feature in future issues of *bmj*.

Meanwhile, may I wish you a peaceful and restorative summer so that we can all return to the service of Jesus with joy in the autumn. SN

bmj 2020 Essay



Signposts in the Psalms: Leading through the Loss of a Pandemic

by Simon Hollis

Author: Simon is the associate minister at Stafford Baptist Church and is in his NAM second year. He is the winner of the bmj's 2020 Essay Competition.

As a new leader, Joshua found himself leading God's people when they had 'never been this way before' (Joshua 3:4b). Any Newly Accredited Minister who began to lead in the global pandemic might well empathise with the challenge! The past two years have provided much new terrain, as we seek to lead well in a time of transition and communal crisis. While the contemporary landscape has often seemed unfamiliar, I suggest that scripture provides a clear topography for such times of uncertainty and loss, both for individuals and community, and shows how, as Joshua did, we may keep God clearly before us (Joshua 3:4a).

Society's Responses to the Pandemic

A helpful starting point for considering the effects of the contemporary pandemic upon the life of the community is to consider how individuals have responded both intellectually and emotionally. Leaders might usefully begin by recognising the framework of changes in western society over the past half-century

in which truth is increasingly considered to be relative rather than absolute.¹ A reduced reliance upon truth and reason itself may then be accompanied by an increased trust upon emotions and feelings, rather than seeking solutions from any external authority.² There is a rejection not only of a Christian worldview, but of the existence of any 'bigger story' or metanarrative.³ Within the context of the pandemic, the minister accordingly faced a double challenge. Not only was the Christian message not necessarily seen as authoritative, but ministers met a multiplicity of contradictory views about what constituted *secular* truth. Strongly held, and competing, views within church's memberships both about the risks of Covid-19 and the appropriate congregational responses could easily occur. Left unchecked, old standing conflicts within church communities could quickly re-emerge,⁴ and individuals become disorientated and distressed. The minister needed to work actively to preserve unity and wellbeing.

The importance of careful discernment and learning together for leaders and their teams as they moved forward quickly became apparent.⁵ In addition to the need for wise and proactive decision-making, undertaken in a timely way, the leader needed to be attentive not only to the decision itself and its pastoral implications, but the way in which decisions were reached. As the Baptist Union reminded churches, *'how we make decisions may prove to be as important to churches as the decisions themselves'*.⁶ Amidst a range of profoundly differing views, we needed to 'look not only to our own interests, but the interests of others' (Philippians 2:1-4). The Baptist Union appealed 'to everyone involved to be kind to each other, to listen well, to appreciate the pressure leaders are under, and to compromise accordingly'.⁷

In addition to the different intellectual responses to the pandemic, leaders were also presented with a range of emotional responses following from loss.⁸ Different models and theories can be offered to understand the process of grief. Kübler-Ross, for example, describes a journey of different stages, including denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.⁹ For the purposes of responding to the losses sustained in the pandemic, several key points informing pastoral practice may be drawn from such models. First, different people will experience and work through grief in different ways.¹⁰ When a community is grieving, individuals will not necessarily be at the same stage as each other or express their grief in the same way. Nor will the same loss affect people in the same way. The response to the isolation of lockdown or a move

to online services, for example, affected individuals very differently based on their life circumstances and temperament. Secondly, the journey through grief is a process, rather than a one-off event, and pastoral practice must reflect this. Thirdly, the response to grief may be unpredictable and driven by strong emotions, of which the minister will need to be aware as s/he leads the church and provides pastoral care. Those who are themselves in pain may inappropriately project their personal anger and frustration upon others.¹¹ I will return to many of these themes later, but at this stage simply note that recognising that these dynamics are at work may help the leader retain some objectivity regarding their situation, and thereby strengthen their resilience.

The Leader's Response: How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You are Going¹²

Alongside the challenges above, churches quickly discovered that traditional approaches to ministry and leading did not necessarily serve well in a pandemic.¹³ Such models of leadership assume a degree of agency, control, certainty about the future and ability to implement plans that do not exist at such times. Rather, both leader and community occupy a liminal space,¹⁴ where one pattern of living and being has been left behind, but future ways are not yet known.¹⁵ The responsive style required to meet constantly changing situations differs markedly from a model of intentional planning for the future,¹⁶ calling for a different skill set from the leader.¹⁷

At an organisational level alone, the intense uncertainty generated by the

pandemic included operating within legal rules for key activities, which were frequently changing. At such times, the leader quickly learned that 'overplanning can be futile.'¹⁸ This is not, however, to argue that organisational excellence is not needed, but rather that it must be achieved in a different way. A healthy organisational structure and practices are critical if an organisation is going to thrive in a time of change.¹⁹ Leadership in liminal times must be both 'deeply spiritual and organisationally savvy',²⁰ with theological reflection and wise practical action reinforcing and mutually facilitating each other.

To achieve good practical planning, the minister must first be agile in adapting to changing circumstances. Such a leadership style, however, makes heavy demands on time and energy, as everyday activities become significantly more time-consuming and complicated.²¹ As Collicutt notes, when we work to a known template or schema much can be done, whereas when there is the need to discern how something should be done, or it is being done in a new way, more energy is required.²² The 2021-2022 BU presidential theme of being attentive to 'rhythms of grace' is accordingly particularly timely.²³ Leaders need to care for their own physical and spiritual wellbeing if they are to remain effective in their ministry. 'Those who are looking to us for spiritual sustenance need us to be spiritual seekers ourselves.'²⁴ The support of others is vital to the minister maintaining their own resilience; a practice that Baptists Together reflects in its Continuing Ministerial Development programme.²⁵

A second key practical element to leadership in liminal seasons, is the ability to develop an openness in others; of 'leading the learning process of a group who must develop new beliefs, habits or values'²⁶ Fostering a culture of discernment will be a key aspect of such leadership.²⁷ Billman and Migliore use the insightful imagery of midwifery to describe the role of the pastor in such situations.²⁸ The minister is not 'the primary agent through whom new life emerges';²⁹ rather 'unable to finally control the outcome of her labour, or the labour of those she assists, she strives to be faithful where uncertainty and disappointment are present alongside grace and promise.'³⁰

Signposts for the Leader: The Psalms of Lament

How then are we to lead well in changed times, maintaining the wellbeing and wholeness of both community and individual, while focusing on, and engaging honestly with, our Almighty God? I suggest we find that many of the contemporary themes I have identified above are addressed and brought together within the psalms of lament. Indeed, some of these psalms specifically deal with illness and the spiritual challenges this may bring (eg Psalm 39:10; Psalm 38:11).³¹ Day quotes Gunkel's view that references to enemies in these psalms may suggest that the sufferer believes that his/her sin is responsible for this condition and that s/he is God-forsaken (eg Psalms 6; 13; 38; 39; 69; 88).³² Such a reading would give the context of a plague where both individual and community are questioning why their situation exists, and where God is within it.

That the psalms of lament have not necessarily been seen as an obvious starting point for scriptural reflection for the contemporary leader may reflect the fact that the tradition of lament is itself noticeably absent from liturgical and pastoral practice.³³ Billman and Migliore suggest various sociological and theological concerns as to why this might be so, including perceived inappropriate emphases on victimhood, complaint and subjective experience alongside alleged incorrect doctrine regarding theodicy and eschatology.³⁴ The absence of lament may also reflect a wider prevailing culture struggles that struggles to acknowledge or give expression to various aspects of grief and loss.

As Swinton notes, such an approach in the face of suffering is deeply problematic pastorally, denying both the grieving process and the opportunity to build resilience.³⁵ Not only is lament consistent with human experience, and an essential aspect of pastoral care; it is consistent with biblical witness and doctrine.³⁶ Brueggemann asserts that, 'a church that goes on singing 'happy songs' in the face of raw reality is doing something very different from what the Bible itself does.'³⁷ A focus only on positivity may alienate the grieving, or render expression of faith superficial.³⁸ By contrast, the ability to give voice to suffering,³⁹ for which the psalms of lament provide a template, is vital to hope and healing.⁴⁰

The psalmist does not shy away from addressing depths of feeling, or seek to flatten his experience to make it more acceptable to God or others. Commenting on the plea of forsakenness in Psalm

22, Brueggemann emphasises that the resolution concluding the hymn does not nullify the experience of abandonment expressed at its beginning.⁴¹ The very frankness of the psalms of lament demonstrate that raw emotion is not 'off-limits' to God, in a way that the contemporary church might find both shocking and sacrilegious.

A reservation about expressing such profound hurts to God is that this might lead us away from God rather than drawing nearer, betraying a lack of trust of God and divine providence.⁴² This is emphatically not, however, the perspective of the psalmist, for whom complaint (in the sense that 'things are not right in the present arrangement...and it is God's obligation to change things') and trust are juxtaposed (eg Psalm 22:1 and 22:5).⁴³ In complete contrast to unbelief, Brueggemann argues that the psalmist displays 'bold faith' that insists that 'the world must be experienced as it really is, not in some pretended way.'⁴⁴ Indeed, Swinton argues that it is only by holding together the tension of confidence and doubt that that the catharsis of lament can occur.⁴⁵ The psalms of lament reflect what is often a particularly troubling aspect of grief, namely the dissonance between how life is being experienced, and how we expect it to be and how we understand God might act.⁴⁶ Within the pattern the psalms provide, Broyles makes the key point that should never be overlooked in the heat of a crisis; that the community and its leaders are first to call upon God.⁴⁷ Exercising Brueggemann's 'bold faith', chaos and disorder can safely be brought to the God for whom there is nothing out of bounds.

Applying this pastorally for the leader may mean that they seek to create spaces within public worship where loss can be recognised and acknowledged. While this may not be the environment where self-disclosure is most easily or even best expressed, this may still provide reassurance that worship takes place in and through the reality of lived experiences. Swinton notes that small groups may be useful in providing mutual support,⁴⁸ such fellowship and community often developing organically as Christians meet to pray and study together. A key aspect of this may simply be the knowledge that others are alongside those who suffer in their loss and perplexity. While there is a time for well-considered practical support and encouraging words, Nouwen writes of the deep friendship and Christian love that is often expressed simply by being alongside in silence.⁴⁹

As Billman and Migliore insightfully observe, permission to express loss before God, does not equate to a mandate to do so, or to require that this is shared publicly or in a particular way.⁵⁰ The observation is relevant to how and when the leader may seek to express publicly their own grief and loss. It is also relevant to what the pastor may see in others. As has been noted, grief and healing are experienced differently. Pastors may need to remind themselves that they are not subconsciously to expect or demand a particular response from those they are alongside.⁵¹

While the psalms of lament express profound emotion, their function should nevertheless not be interpreted solely in

terms of 'therapeutic catharsis.'⁵² Intellect and action are also involved. The laments are a means of engaging with God, and to call upon God to act. Brueggemann notes the use of the language of the law court and the imagery of the people bringing a legal case before God (eg Psalm 107:4-32).⁵³ Underpinning this is the covenantal context of the relationship between God and His people. God is not an independent judge but is inextricably bound to God's people.⁵⁴ Westermann observes that the probing questioning of 'Why?' (eg Psalm 74:1) and 'How long?' (eg Psalm 79:5) are borne of disorientation and confusion.⁵⁵ As Broyles notes, however, the questioning is not to elicit factual information, but rather to demand that God must act and respond.⁵⁶ The purpose of such a legal claim is that God will bring do what is just and right (Psalm 107:4-32).⁵⁷ In a model the leader may find helpful as s/he seeks the way forward, cerebral debate with God is thereby interwoven with profound emotion, and practical uncertainty is mixed with belief that the covenant God can and will act decisively on the part of His people. It may be noted in passing that this pattern resonates with the process of discernment that Beaumont describes for leaders in liminal spaces as they frame issues, explore options, weigh evidence and test decisions.⁵⁸

The conclusion of the lament psalms is accordingly not despair. Rather, with God's intervention, the journey of the prayer, is 'from plea to praise.'⁵⁹ This response is 'full and unfettered.' Indeed, Brueggemann suggests that the heights of praise can only be realised if there is a full appreciation of the depths from which rescue has taken place, and accordingly

the sheer extent of God's saving love.⁶⁰ The praise itself brings the minister to an appreciation that is fundamental not only to personal faith but to discerning leadership, namely that 'God is not neutral about our mission and our choices.'⁶¹

As grief itself is a process, so the psalms of lament provide a template for the process of recovery, healing, and hope.⁶² Indeed, regular reminders that this is a process may help the minister when change does not follow from a single conversation or event. In times of uncertainty and distress, the psalms call leader and community first to God.⁶³ They address life as it is, in all its rawness and perplexity, while expressing confidence in the God who brings hope and a future. They provide a theological framework for how the leader might wrestle to find the way forward, inviting them to embrace practical and organisational action alongside theological reflection. Pointing to hope where there may be despair, their message needs to be rediscovered.⁶⁴

Notes to Text

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2. Ibid, 52-55.
3. James Thwaites, *The Church Beyond the Congregation: The Strategic Role of the Church in the Postmodern Era*. Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999, 23.
4. Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You Are Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*. Lanham, ML: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019, 12.
5. Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Unchartered Territory*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2015, 111.
6. Ministries Team of BUGB, 'Guidance on

- Church Worship: Coronavirus'* (6 January 2022), 6, <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/582206/Coronavirus.Guidance.on.aspx>
7. Ibid, 6.
8. Bill Merrington, *101 Ways to Cope with Grief and Loss*. Buxhall: Kevin Mayhew, 2007, 12.
9. Alan Billings, *Dying and Grieving: A Guide to Pastoral Ministry*. London: SPCK, 2002, 48-49; Walter Brueggemann engages extensively with Kubler-Ross in Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and The Life of Faith*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995, 84-97.
10. Bill Merrington, *Grief, Loss and Pain in Churches*. Buxhall: Kevin Mayhew, 2011, 36.
11. Kathleen D. Billman & Daniel L. Migliore, *Rachel's Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006, 139.
12. Beaumont, Lead, i.
13. Ibid, viii.
14. Ibid, 1-27.
15. Ibid, 5.
16. Ibid, 7.
17. Bolsinger, *Mountains*, 111.
18. Beaumont, *Lead*, 2.
19. Bolsinger, *Mountains*, 83.
20. Beaumont, *Lead*, 2.
21. Ibid, 12.
22. Joanna Collicutt, *The Psychology of Christian Character Formation*. London: SCM Press, 2015, 162.
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26. Bolsinger, *Mountains*, 111.
27. Beaumont, *Lead*, 67-92.
28. Billman & Migliore, *Rachel's Cry*, 128-129.
29. Ibid, 129.
30. Ibid, 129.

31. John Day, *Psalms*. London: T&T Clark International, 1990, 26-27.
32. Ibid, 25.
33. John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007, 114.
34. Billman & Migliore, *Cry*, 17-19.
35. Swinton, *Compassion*, 114-115.
36. Billman & Migliore, *Cry*, 20.
37. Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1984, 51-52.
38. Broyles, C. C., '*Psalms of Lament*', in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, Tremper Longman III & Peter Enns (eds). Downers Grove: IVP, 2008, 395.
39. Swinton, *Compassion*, 104.
40. Billman & Migliore, *Cry*, 80.
41. Walter Brueggemann, *A Pathway of Interpretation: The Old Testament for Pastors and Students*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008, 95.
42. Billman & Migliore, *Cry*, 18.
43. Brueggemann, *Pathway*, 96.
44. Brueggemann, *Costly*, 62; Brueggemann, *Message*, 52.
45. Swinton, *Compassion*, 112-113.
46. Brueggemann, *Psalms*, 105.
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48. Swinton, *Compassion*, 121.
49. Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Out of Solitude: Three Meditations on the Christian Life*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1974, 34.
50. Billman & Migliore, *Cry*, 111.
51. Ibid, 134-136.
52. Swinton, *Compassion*, 111.
53. Brueggemann, *Message*, 107.
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55. Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1981, 176-177.
56. Broyles, *Lament*, 395.
57. Brueggemann, *Costly*, 63.
58. Beaumont, *Lead*, 73.
59. Brueggemann, *Costly*, 57; Westermann, *Psalms*, 33, 75.
60. Brueggemann, *Costly*, 58.
61. Beaumont, *Lead*, 73; Billman & Migliore, *Cry*, 31.
62. Billman & Migliore, *Cry*, 83.
63. Swinton, *Compassion*, 113.
64. Brueggemann, *Costly*, 67.

Research into Baptist life

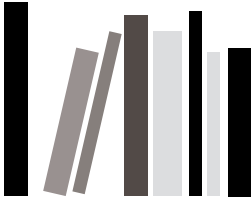
Did you know that there is a free-access archive of all available past *bmj* issues, including its predecessor, *The Fraternal*?

These journals provide a lens into the life of Baptist ministers and their churches back to 1907, and could help you in your research. Our friend Rob Bradshaw, librarian at Spurgeon's College, scanned all the back issues that we have been able to locate and hosts them for us on Theology on the Web, which itself is an amazing resource and worth a look. The *bmj* archive does not include the most recent year or two, but is updated periodically.

You can find the archive here:

https://theologyontheweb.org.uk/journals_baptist.html





articles

Learning From the Pandemic by Paul Beasley-Murray

Author: Paul Beasley-Murray is now retired from Baptist ministry but continues to write and reflect on his experience.

In the early summer of 2020, when I thought that by the autumn of that year the Covid pandemic would be a thing of the past, I wrote a series of 10 reflections on Covid 19, which I then posted on my blog (see www.paulbeasleymurray.com):

1. A time for reflection
2. A time to overcome fear of death
3. A time to challenge the grandchildren
4. A time for deep loneliness
5. A time for using the phone
6. A time for irregular communion?
7. A time for remembering loved ones in a new way
8. A time to sit light to our diary
9. A time for extroverts to rise to the challenge of social isolation
10. A time to increase the 'R' number

A further two years have passed. What have we learnt in the intervening time? With a view to finding an answer I emailed some friends and asked the following three questions:

1. What have we as people learned from the past two years?

2. What have we as churches learned from the past two years?
3. How will these lessons enable churches to be more effective in sharing the good news?

I added:

The third question is asked in the context of the crisis which the Christian church in the UK faces, according to a headline in The Times, 18 December 2021: Losing our religion: Christians poised to become a minority. The writer went on: 'The number of Christians in England and Wales is close to falling below half of the population'. This was based on a recent analysis of the 2019 census. Less than half of men, at just 47.4%, reported their religion as Christian, with 54.9 % of women declaring themselves to be Christian. Combine these two figures, and we have 51% of men and women calling themselves Christian; while the proportion of people who cited no religious belief rose to 38.4%.

This crisis has been in the making for years, but has been exacerbated by the

pandemic. As a nationwide survey by the Evangelical Alliance last autumn revealed, most churches have lost 30% of their people; the giving is down by 30%; and most volunteers do not want to return to doing what they did in the past.

However, as is often said, in Chinese the word for 'crisis' is made up of two words danger and opportunity. At the moment we see the 'danger' of an ever-declining church—but what are the opportunities before us? Clearly we cannot go on as we are. Are there things we have learnt which with God's help we can capitalize upon and so go forward?

What concerns me is that although the lifting of all legal restrictions relating to Covid has issued in a 'freedom bounce'—evidenced not least by so many people keen to go away on holiday either here in the UK or beyond - in most churches there does not seem to have been an 'evangelistic bounce.' Contrary to what I had hoped in my final blog in June 2020, there has been little evidence of the 'R' (reproduction) factor in terms of people becoming Christians. At the beginning of the pandemic the British government was trying to suppress the 'R' number for Covid, which was then running at three (I discovered that the 'R' factor for measles is 15!). By contrast, my hope was that at a time when there is so much fear around—fear of the disease and fear for our own mortality—as Christian people we would make the most of the opportunity to increase the 'R' factor of faith. However, although there appears to have been a great interest in Alpha courses during the pandemic, which presumably have

resulted in conversions, this missional uplift does not seem to have been generally true. Indeed, according to a recent report on the Church of England's multimillion investment programme to arrest the decline in attendance by growing new and existing churches, the number of new worshippers recorded in the two years 2020 and 2021 was zero.¹

This was the background to my sending out the three questions to some of my friends. In the end the poll sample of those replying to my three questions was not large enough to draw conclusions that were statistically significant. Nonetheless, the responses helped me in my thinking, and so I am most grateful for those friends who made time to respond. Hopefully this article will in turn provide my readers with pointers to the way in which the 'R' factor of faith can be increased!

Question 1: What have we learned as people?

1. We are fragile people, subject to illness and death. All of us—not just those over 75—are vulnerable. Life is provisional; only death is certain! There was a lot of fear. Indeed, with the increase in Covid infections following the lifting of all government Covid restrictions, for many the fear remains.
2. Mental health is fragile. Not just children have struggled. Perhaps not surprisingly, extroverts have struggled with the pandemic more than introverts.
3. It is not good to be alone. For many living on their own lockdown was a period of intense isolation.

4. The strain of lockdown contributed to the breakdown of many marriages and relationships. Yet at the same time families proved enormously supportive to one another
 5. In a crisis we need decisive leadership. Had we locked down immediately the threat of Covid was recognised, instead of dithering for two or three weeks, many lives would have been saved. By contrast the government showed decisive leadership in sourcing and ordering vaccines.
 6. Leadership demands more than charisma and competence: without character ('integrity') people will not trust their leaders.
 7. We are blessed with some of the best scientists in the world
 8. We are blessed with a National Health Service, but it clearly needs reform. Sadly we have discovered that some of our GPs are greedy (demanding £15 for every jab they gave) and—unlike their hospital counterparts—not prepared to meet patients face-to-face.
 9. We have failed to invest sufficiently in social care.
 10. The divide between rich and poor in the UK has become even greater and desperately needs attention.
 11. There is such a thing as community spirit. There are lots of good people outside the church who are motivated to help others. We have seen this in the way in which people have cared for elderly neighbours, supported food banks, and volunteered to help with the logistics of running vaccination centres.
 12. By contrast some people can be selfish (hoarding food and toilet rolls at the beginning of the pandemic), others greedy (firms wrongly claiming for government support) while yet others be corrupt (notably in the provision of masks and other items of personal protection which were not fit for purpose)
 13. Humans need to be able to touch one another. Lockdown when we could not hug and could not hold the hand of another, was distressing for everybody.
- Question 2: What have we learned as churches?**
1. Churches can change! They are able to do things differently.
 2. Churches need to continue to change. To be more missional and less inwardly focused, we need to invest in new and less institutional ways of doing church. This is a Kairos moment to do things differently before we return to the old default position.
 3. Creative leadership in the church is vital. Churches which were able to think outside the box fared much better than those who didn't.
 4. Churches need to be more tech savvy. Services led from bedrooms did not help
 5. Churches need to work with the community, and not just for the community. Working with the community builds relationships which result in respect and an openness to the gospel.
 6. Small groups (fellowship groups etc) meeting by Zoom were a spiritual

lifeline for many in the pandemic. They also formed effective units of pastoral care.

7. Zoom and its equivalents are a blessing and may well be part of the future church: they save on time and travel, make for efficiency in business meetings, and are more environmentally friendly.
8. Small groups discovered that the break-out group mechanism could lead to greater sharing and intimacy,
9. Much as Zoom and streaming have been a blessing, we also need opportunities to encounter one another face-to-face. Virtual church is a shadow of the real thing!
10. In a pandemic up-beat worship has its limitations. There is a place for lament, for responsive prayers, and even for silence in worship. There is also a place for shorter sermons!
11. The needs of God's people in a pandemic are best served by helping them to root their lives in prayer and in Scripture. Ministers are not called to entertain their people!
12. In the future—and not just in a pandemic—ministers need to major on reminding people that they are loved by God. What is more, churches need to reflect God's love to one another and to the wider world.
13. We have overburdened our people in the past. It is significant that in most churches older volunteers are reluctant to return to their former 'duties.' We need to be more selective and more strategic in our future church activities, and where necessary inspire and mobilise younger people to play their part.

Question 3: How will these lessons enable churches to be more effective in sharing the good news?

1. Churches cannot go back to the way they did church in the past. We have changed—and we need to continue to change. If we want to survive as churches, we need to continue to change! One respondent quoted some words of Canadian Baptist church consultant Alan Roxburgh written prior to the pandemic:

We are rapidly moving into a time when we will need leaders who can form multiple missional communities across an area rather than manage a 'congregation' built around a building to which people drive for meetings based on common, tribal identity. That model simply has not capacity to form the church as a missionary movement in our culture.²

My own conviction is that what the Church of England called 'a mixed ecology' in its document, *A Vision for the Church of England in the 2020s*, is necessary, but even those churches who retain their buildings operating a more traditional form of church, need to make major changes if they are to be truly missionally focused.³ Churches that do not change will die.

2. If churches are to change then leaders need to lead. In partnership with their people church leaders need to communicate vision, develop strategies, and set appropriate albeit challenging goals for which they must be held accountable. Leadership is about making a difference, which with

God's help involves making things happen. If the post-pandemic church is to have a future, decline must be reversed. New life and growth must become the order of the day. There need to be welcome teams which focus on integrating newcomers and regular courses for seekers (eg Alpha, Christianity Explored, and Pilgrim). If we are to fulfil the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20, churches need to be made up of 'missionary disciples'⁴ —for this to happen, intentional discipleship in small groups should become part of the staple diet for all churchgoers.

3. Churches need to provide resources for people to root their lives in God. Sunday worship needs to connect with people's hopes, fears, and concerns and not be a form of escapism. We need to help people find resources for their daily personal walk. Every day during the pandemic and still now Nicholas Henshall, the Dean of Chelmsford Cathedral, emails out a short and simple guide to 'Daily Prayer' which always contains the invitation:

As you enter into prayer today, take a moment to be still. Come into God's presence with a deepfelt desire to meet with God now. Know that God is the God who sees you and that God is looking at you now with great love.

4. At a time when the cost of living has escalated even higher as a result of the war in Ukraine, churches need to continue to be proactive in caring for the increasing number of people who are struggling to pay their bills. This

means churches coming together and not competing with one another in providing food banks and the like. It also means a willingness to work with people of goodwill outside the church. I found it interesting that precisely because of their previous work in the local community, at the beginning of the pandemic Altrincham Baptist Church, the first church of which I was minister, was asked by the local council if it would be one of the community hubs in the borough, and as a result the church was given a grant of £200,000 for this purpose on the understanding it would work with people of faith and of none.

5. Churches need to create new ways of reaching their communities with the good news. Evangelism is not an option: it is an essential aspect of mission. Precisely because we have been through such a fearful time, there may well be a new openness to the gospel. In a way that was not so true before Covid, people of all ages recognise their fragility and vulnerability. In the first year of the pandemic an LSE podcast talked about the 'burgeoning body of scholarship' showing that crisis and upheaval in society leads to opportunities for 'transformative social change.'⁵ So, too, in the decade or so following the trauma of WW2, there was readiness for spiritual change as evidenced by the huge numbers attending the Billy Graham crusades of the 1950s. True, the situation today is different. As Canon Hugh Dibbens, a former evangelism advisor in the Chelmsford Diocese, has noted, 'the

church has lost much of the respect it had' and 'spiritually people are a long way further back';⁶ and yet it is significant that at the beginning of the pandemic, when huge numbers of people were following online services, there seemed to be an enormous interest in spiritual things. In mid-March 2021 the Church of England were reporting that their national online services alone had attracted more than 3.7 million views since restrictions on gatherings for public worship had been introduced almost a year previously; and that clips and content from the online services had been seen 40 million times on social media channels.⁷ These figures did not include the many millions of people logging on to services being offered by individual churches, both Anglican and non-Anglican—although research around that time showed that the average visit to an online church service was less than a minute. Whatever, the question therefore arises: can churches capitalise on this new openness? Hugh Dibbens went on:

*We have to win trust and do significantly more in the way of introducing Jesus. Hence the foodbanks, neighbourly support, care for refugees and social engagement are so important, both for their own sake and as possible pathways to deeper things.*⁸

This, however, involves creativity as to how churches share the good news with the community. To cite Altrincham Baptist Church again, I was impressed with how they responded to the

pandemic. Recognising the intense loneliness suffered by so many, on the glass front of their church in huge colourful letters they displayed the message: YOU ARE LOVED. Denied the opportunity to hold their annual Carols in the Park event, which would have attracted 500 people, they switched to making and installing a 10-station Advent Trail which, in the words of Ashley Hardingham, their senior minister, 'attracted thousands and generated huge amounts of hope and goodwill and told the Christian story simply.'

6. Churches need to be more creative in the way in which they engage with children and young people, and indeed everybody under 50. Before the pandemic the situation was serious, with around one-third of churches having no 0-16s, and another third having five or less 0-16s. Since the pandemic, it is much worse. I loved the suggestion of one respondent of regular services of Toddler Praise! Worship does not necessarily need to be dumbed down, but it does need to be made accessible to the younger generations. Similarly preaching needs to be less discursive and more direct, and at all times free of jargon. As it is, many churches have become to all intents and purposes Darby and Joan clubs with little provision for others!
7. All churches need to be tech-savvy, and in a fast-changing tech world prepared to continue to invest in people and money. The degree to which churches will engage online will naturally vary. However, I find it

significant that the contributors to a recent collection of scholarly essays on digital church were not calling for churches to go totally online, but to recognise the need for personal meetings when possible.⁹ The post-pandemic local church needs to be hybrid, including both digital and personal experiences. Interestingly, as a result of using Zoom during the pandemic, the Cambridge Society of Essex (an alumni club I chair), has decided that in future, along with our termly face-to-face lectures and lunches, we will also have four or five Zoom meetings a year; furthermore, all of our committee meetings are now by Zoom. Digital church has great advantages, but in the words of another respondent, 'there is no substitute for being together in person.' Indeed, when it comes to celebrating the Lord's Supper, digital is a pale reflection of the real thing and always comes a poor second: there are times when we most definitely need to be together.

8. Finally, preaching needs to reflect the concerns and longings which have developed in the hearts and minds of many as a result of the pandemic by focusing on the good news found in the crucified and risen Christ.
 - Jesus knows. Even in heaven Jesus bears the marks of the nails in his hands and feet, Jesus is not unaware of suffering. More than anyone else he can sympathise and even empathise with us in our pain. Jesus knows
 - Jesus loves. His arms outstretched on the Cross still envelop us all.

Nobody is excluded from his love. It doesn't matter who we are or what we have done, he loves each one of us, as if there were no one else to love.

- Jesus offers life. Death will not have the last word. The crucified is also the risen and ascended Lord who offers hope to all. He blazed a trail through the valley of the shadow down which we too may follow

Notes to text

1. See 'Converts cost ailing CofE £6000 each' in *The Times*, 12 March 2022.
2. See Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional Map-Making: Skills for Leading in Times of Transition*. Jossey-Bass, 2010.
3. See *A Vision for the Church of England in the 2020s*, of which the decision made at the Church of England's Synod in July 2021 to start 10,000 new lay-led churches by 2030 is a part.
4. According to *A Vision for the Church of England in the 2020s*, a 'Christ-centred Jesus-shaped' church is 'a church of Missionary Disciples'
5. *The pandemic as a portal: 2020 mobilization, activism and opportunities for structural change following crisis and upheaval*, London School of Economics.
6. Hugh Dibbens, *A few reflections on the social impact of the Covid pandemic*, March 2022 (an unpublished paper sent to me).
7. 'Millions join worship online as churches bring services into the home in pandemic year', see www.churchofengland.org, 16 March 2021.
8. See Dibbens.
9. Heidi A. Campbell & John Dyer (eds), *Ecclesiology for a Digital Church: Theological Reflections on a New Normal*. London: SCM, 2022.

A Critical Exploration of Female Sexuality in the Christian Tradition II

by Ingrid Shelley

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In the first part of this article, published in *bmj* in October 2021, I addressed the biblical tradition and its understandings of female sexuality. In this continuation I will explore some aspects of the Christian tradition and how it has perceived and discussed women's sexuality, with implications for the present day. In part one I noted Isherwood and Stuart's question that we do not believe in a created order of heaven/earth/underworld any more, so why do we hold onto a body/spirit dualism?¹

Maybe part of the answer to this question is how deeply ingrained suspicion of women's sexuality is. As noted above, the framework for understanding women's sexuality led to some grim declarations by the church fathers. For example:

The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil's gateway.²

What have rouge and white lead to do on a Christian woman's face...they are fires to inflame young man, stimulants of lustful desire, plain evidence of an unchaste mind.³

Watch out that she does not twist and turn you for the worse. What difference does it make whether it is in a wife or in a mother, provided we nonetheless avoid Eve in any woman?⁴

These theological thinkers of the early church conflated sex with sin, even in marriage; and women with sex. Women were seen as vessels of impurity and temptation, even if they were virtuous. They were encouraged to degrade and debase their bodies with starvation, negligence, and veiling. Christian men were urged to avoid mixing with women because of the danger they posed in luring men into sexual transgression. This visceral disgust of sex, and therefore of women, was taken up by Aquinas and into the Reformation by Luther and Calvin. Armstrong suggests that Luther 'particularly hated sex, even though he himself got married and abolished celibacy'.⁵

Much of the discourse of the church fathers is uncomfortable to read. There is a voyeurism and prurience about it that does not sit well from the perspective of a 21st century western woman. Jerome in particular seems to have an unhealthy obsession with the way women look and describes in great detail how they lure men into sexual sin. Reading his words, the thought struck me that he was someone I could imagine turning up at the prison chapel. Armstrong notes that he 'is over-sexualising women because of his own sexual repression'.⁶ Augustine also famously had his own issues with sex; today the Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous programme is also

known as the 'Augustine Fellowship' because members saw their symptoms reflected in his writings. Armstrong also notes that these influential men converted to Christianity with 'violent and explosive types of religious experience',⁷ which tends to result in literalism and fundamentalism. She quite bluntly claims that it is 'unfortunate that the most influential Western Fathers were neurotic and highly emotional men'.⁸ Consequently, in the western Christian tradition, women and their sexual desires became defined by men who did not seem to have particularly good relationships with their own bodies and sexual desires.

There is no doubt that these men have affected the way women and their desires are seen in the Christian world. However, if we are not careful, they can become pantomime-style 'baddies' in the story of women's oppression. I would not want to underestimate their influence and the harm done, but perhaps women have been more subversive and creative than we sometimes suggest. It is not easy to find women's voices talking about their own sexual encounters and desires, but occasionally we can see glimpses. Armstrong quotes the words of a French woman named Grazida who came before the Inquisition because of her suspected membership of the Cathars. In talking about her liaisons with a local priest, she said: 'Our love-making in all that time gave joy to us both. I did not think I sinned, nor does it seem so to me now.'⁹ Here, we get a small insight into the reality of some women's lives, where sex was enjoyable, mutual, and—interestingly—not seen as sin because of the pleasure it gave.

Before I bring this exploration back to the present day, I want to examine one more

area of the Christian tradition. If there had been space in this essay, I would like to have explored the cult of virginity that arose within the tradition, in which women's greatest achievement was to not have sex. However, even though this outlook also comes from a place of dysfunction in the Christian tradition, women themselves used it as a pathway into autonomy by forming convents. This gave rise to a number of extraordinary female theologians, mystics, teachers, and reformers, such as Mother Julian, Hildegard of Bingen, and St Teresa of Avila. In the next section I shall briefly look at what some of these women mystics may tell us about female sexuality.

The Mystics

Female mystics often used erotic and visceral language about their spiritual experiences. However, we should be cautious about how we perceive these writings, because mystical experience was not healthy for all women. Armstrong discusses how the search for ecstatic encounters with God led to some odd and detrimental behaviour. For example the Beguines in Liege fell into trances for whole days, and Mary Magdalene de Pazzi would insist that she should be beaten in front of the other nuns and would lie prostrate at the altar and urge the other nuns to walk over her.¹⁰ The characteristics these women displayed in their search for ecstasy suggest a disregard for safety, a seeking of ultimate withdrawal, and obsession with guilt leading to a desire for punishment. This is hardly surprising given their context. As noted above, women's bodies were seen as tainted, and they were encouraged to withdraw and negate themselves. It is therefore understandable that some dysfunctional behaviours emerged.

Some of these practices also reveal an erotic note; maybe being beaten or walked on was arousing. They also suggest a wish for importance and recognition, something very much lacking for women of the time. It may also be possible that these excesses, so often dismissed as neurotic or hysterical, were themselves a kind of rejection of the expectations laid on women and a reclaiming of their bodies. Joy quotes Grosz, who says that the 'hysteric's defiance through excess, through an overcompliance, is a parody of the expected.'¹¹ Perhaps what we see in these women is not sexual repression or fragile emotionality, but an obstinate protest against the confines and definitions of religious patriarchy. In a sense, their bodies become a place of such negation that it highlights the wrongness of theology that says that hurting the body and denying sexual pleasure is a spiritual requirement.

Some of these women, in convents and lay communities, managed to find a more conventional resistance to their given roles and forged places of autonomy with space to nurture their intellectual, inner, and spiritual lives. These writings reveal their desires, sensuousness, and erotic passions channelled into explorations of faith. Examples include Hadewijch of Antwerp and her writings about Jesus: 'I desired to have full fruition of my beloved, and to understand and taste him to the full...to that end I wished he might content me interiorly with his Godhead in one spirit.'¹² Mechthild of Magdeburg used the Song of Songs as a model for her writings,¹³ which are full of bridal imagery: 'Lord, you are my lover/ my desire/ my flowing well/ my sun/ and I am your mirror.'¹⁴ Hildegard of Bingen only occasionally uses direct erotic language, but her writing is full of

sensuality as she connects with light, colour, and nature. For example, her vision of the Trinity begins, 'Then I saw an extremely bright light and in the light the figure of a man the colour of sapphire, and it was all burning in a delightful red fire.'¹⁵ Hildegard's writings often reveal a deep sense of passion and connectedness.

The lovely sensuality and eroticism of these writings are sometimes dismissed as women just sublimating their desires, which potentially reduces them to objects of pity—poor virgins that cannot have sex, so have to imagine God is their lover. This is a sneery and reductionist notion that disparages their autonomy, creativity, and intelligence. Maybe rather than sublimating, they were allowing their desires and erotic fantasies to be freed and connecting them with their source: God.

However, we should not lose sight of the fact that these were women of their time, and the body/spirit split is still prevalent. The emphasis is on escaping the body and experiencing God's divine love as an ecstasy in the spirit. Even so, there is a joyful lusciousness about their writings that acts as a subversion to the definitions of female sexuality handed to them. The early church fathers saw women as wanton and designed to lure, but they turned this on its head with a delicious rebuff, claiming their sexuality as something between them and God.

Nonetheless, the unease the church has with body and spirit being connected, particularly in sexuality and desire, still lingers. This disconnect is illustrated by a sculpture Bernini created of Teresa of Avila's ecstasy. It lies in the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome and depicts a

vision Teresa had of an angel who pierced her heart with a spear of gold and left her:

completely afire with a great love for God. The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several moans; and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that one can never wish to lose it.¹⁶



The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa (1647–1652), Gian Lorenzo Bernini. See File: *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa September 2015-2a.jpg*—*Wikimedia Commons*

When I visited the church a few years ago, the leaflets given to visitors were at great pains to point out that this was spiritual ecstasy that was being depicted. You can see why—Bernini has sculpted a woman having an orgasm. The head thrown back, open mouth, closed eyes, tensed feet, and the ripples in her gown all point to sexual climax. The church wanted to separate the physical and spiritual—as though sexual pleasure has nothing to do with God.

There is an argument that Bernini's sculpture is not positive for women, because it once again depicts the male gaze. This is reinforced by the fact that Cardinal Cornaro, who commissioned the work, is depicted, with other male members of his family, around the chapel walls observing St Teresa. Irigaray also raises the issue of the male gaze in her critique of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who espoused the sculpture as an illustration of unknowable female pleasure: unknowable because he thought that women did not talk about their own erotic experiences. She points out that he is extolling the female orgasm depicted in a statue made by a man, rather than going to St. Teresa's own writings, which give us genuine insight into her experiences.¹⁷ Her challenge highlights an issue with exploring female desire in that so often it is mediated through the male experience, words, and gaze.

However, I wonder whether it is possible for us to claim something of the sculpture for ourselves, as with the Song of Songs, in deciding what it means to us. I suggest that Bernini's work has a tenderness about it, as though he has enjoyed watching women climax. Good sex is not an either/or occurrence; in our sexual encounters, the pleasure and satisfaction of both (or more) partners are what make it good. To me, it looks like Bernini had good sex, at least sometimes, that he experienced mutual pleasure and delight. So, although his depiction of Teresa is not a direct description of a woman's desire, his gaze is not unfriendly or voyeuristic. His sculpture juxtaposes his knowledge of a woman enjoying sex with the writings of Teresa and confronts us with a startling image of sexuality and spirituality entwined. The statue, as an expression of Teresa's

experiences, invites us to ask questions about whether spirituality and desire are more connected than the Christian tradition has allowed for.

Present Day

In this essay, I have explored just some of the threads of understandings of female sexuality in the Christian tradition. I would like to be able to say that things are now vastly different, but unfortunately, oppressive themes still linger. As we have noted, Christian understandings of sex were firmly rooted in a belief of male dominance and female passivity. Although Western culture espouses mutuality (even if it is not always practised), many Christian groups still hold on to a notion of male initiative and female responsiveness. Piper tells us that 'mature masculinity expresses its leadership in romantic sexual relations by communicating an aura of strong and tender pursuit' and that 'when a wife wants sexual relations with her husband she wants him to seek her and take her and bring her into his arms'.¹⁸ Aside from the 1950s cheesy romance vibe, Piper is coming remarkably close to 'she needs to be persuaded', which feeds into the notion that women mean yes when they say no.

Another consequence of the passivity stance is that it encourages women to be infantilised and their voices and genuine needs erased. This then facilitates a system that seeks to regulate women's bodies, as highlighted by Isherwood and Stuart who tell us that that the religious right in the USA 'advanced a so-called "Family Protection Act" in 1991 which called for lack of contraceptive choice for women as well as a total ban on abortion, divorce and sex education for women'.¹⁹ In this context, women understanding,

naming, and seeking their own sexual wants can become a place of rebellion and resistance that has the potential to ripple out into all areas of life.

Another belief that that still lingers is the fallacy that men want sex more than women. This view, coupled with a Christian context where men are encouraged to control their sexual urges to maintain purity, has led to a group of ideas that still affect Christian women. These include women being seen as objects for male sexual satisfaction, as temptresses whose bodies and dress need to be controlled, and as guards of chastity. These beliefs lead to an unhealthy prurience around women's (particularly young women's) bodies and behaviour. Piper reveals this mindset in a criticism of women becoming more 'masculine'. He suggests that even though a 'scantly clad young woman pumping iron in a health club' may be attractive, the sexual encounter would be 'hasty and volatile'.²⁰ Here, he not only exposes his gross stereotyping, but also his own voyeurism and a lack of understanding of women. Another example of where these ideas manifest themselves is in the teaching of young people about sex. Bolz-Weber writes about her experience of a Christian Charm class in which a questionnaire alleged to reveal how feminine the participants were. Unfeminine traits included 'gawdy makeup...over-display in dress...a quarrelsome spirit...unchastity'.²¹ These examples are from the USA and may therefore be susceptible to being dismissed, but they reveal a strong mindset that still permeates much of current Christianity across the world.

The concept at the root of these attempts to define women's sexuality—that men

want sex more than women—has been challenged across many disciplines. Eden, in his exploration of whether women are inherently passive, concludes that, in terms of desire, 'history and scripture show that women have an equal capacity for actively pursuing sex. They are not inherently "passive" at all.'²² I would suggest that trying to come to any conclusions about whether men want sex more than women is difficult because social and cultural conditioning will underpin any exploration, making it hard to come to a definitive verdict. Some men may want sex more than some women, but equally some women may want sex more than some men. Attempting to use sex drive as a framework to decide what desire and sexual relations should look like is futile.

Fortunately, women still resist and find ways to challenge these persistent myths around female sexuality and forge better understandings. In a wonderful piece of subversion, Nadia Bolz-Weber asked women to send her their purity rings, which they had received as symbols of a pledge of abstinence. An artist—Nancy Anderson—melted the rings and created a sculpture of a vulva, which was presented to Gloria Steinem at a conference.²³ The sculpture is a symbol of the kind of joyous reclaiming that Christian women can undertake.

The purity movement seeks to define and control young women. In contrast, the sculpture is an act of celebration of female sexuality and a rejection of these values and beliefs. It also points to the need for women to claim freedom and liberty in defining their own sexuality to challenge so-called Christian norms around sex. This call to liberation is happening across

the church in many different ways. Bolz-Weber calls for a new reformation, 'one that's not based on a standardized list of thou shalt nots but on concern for each other's flourishing.'²⁴ Isherwood and Stuart suggest that taking the body seriously as a place where theology happens can enable the church to create new paradigms and understandings. They recognise that the female body is a 'site not only of our oppression but of rebellion.'²⁵ Farley highlights that the experience of 'oppressive and repressive gendered social and political patterns'²⁶ is one of the strands that signals a need to rethink our 'ethical norms' and ask, 'what will a justice ethic look like in the sexual sphere of our lives?'²⁷

These theologians are empowering Christian women to know themselves and trust themselves; they challenge women to use their experiences of their bodies as a springboard into exploring theology and spirituality in creative and interesting ways. The church often responds to this call for freedom by suggesting that sex is dangerous, and we therefore need to have controls. However, this fear is again rooted in old beliefs about the purpose of female bodies (to have babies) and the need to control them. Liberation does not reject ethics; in fact, it enables the possibility of developing a better and healthier ethic around sexuality. The definitions women have been given by the church have generated hurt, abuse, and violence. Forging an ethic based on observed and explored reality will enable authentic thriving for all of us.

Conclusion

The beliefs that have defined female sexuality in the Christian tradition include the dominance of men, understandings

around procreation, the sinfulness of Eve, and a dualistic approach to body and spirit. These threads have created a context where women's sexual lives have been restricted and sexual ethics have developed around prohibition, vilification, and control. However, this is not the whole story: there are resources in the tradition that indicate that people in their personal lives enjoyed sexual pleasure with one another and that women found ways of creating autonomy for themselves and resisting the dominant narrative. But as this exploration reveals, women exploring their own sexuality has been a matter of pushing back against definitions and rules given by a male-dominated church. Women therefore have had to forge rebellious or contrary understandings of themselves rather than starting from a place of 'what do I want?', 'what is my sexuality about?', or 'how do I define my desires?'. This is changing and is in many ways uncharted territory. Christian women today have an opportunity to go beyond resistance and forge a fresh, liberating approach to sex. I would suggest that new sexual mores for Christian women should include women celebrating their bodies in all their messy glory, women embracing and exploring their own sexual desires and wants, and women shaping sexual ethics based on mutuality, consent, and respectful care for others.

As Christian women, we cannot escape the heritage that we have been given, and this may cast unsettling shadows across our own sexual desires—fantasies and kinky pleasures we are too embarrassed to share, etc. However, we can hold these things lightly, accept them for what they are, play with them, talk about them, and have fun with them, whilst knowing that they are not necessarily autonomously

chosen. We can enjoy what we have and reject worrying about the 'correct' way to be sexual. Our tradition has many resources that enable us to meet a God who is earthy, sensual, erotic, and loves bodies so much s/he became one. These resources can allow us to face the shadows and subvert them with playful self-acceptance.

Notes to Text

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4. Augustine, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century: Letters 211–270, 1*–29* (Epistulae) II/4 (transl S. J. R. Teske)*. NY: New City Press, 2005, 169.
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The German Baptist Ministers' Conference

by Kai Turck

Author: Kai Turck is pastor at Kimble Free Church, Little Kimble, Bucks, and attended the German Conference on behalf of BMF.

The triennial German Baptist Ministers' Conference took place this year from 14-17 March in Willingen, a rural part of central Germany. It is organised by the German *Pastorenschaft*, the representation of ministers within the German Baptist Union. They invited Tim Edworthy, current chair of the (British) BMF, who also extended an invitation to me. Unfortunately, on the morning of departure, Tim tested positive for Covid, so I was the sole representative of the BU in Germany.

To give some context, in Germany there are about 800 Union-affiliated Baptist churches representing the vast majority of German Baptists. These 800 churches

have around 600 *Pastoren* looking after them, of which about 400 attended the conference. Only one other nation was represented, Hungary; others being prevented by Covid. The welcome and appreciation we received were truly humbling.

The ability to foster the unity of the body of Christ across Europe (and further afield) remains critically important in these times. The requirement for balanced cross-border dialogue and a breaking down of misconceptions, particularly in our current political climate and context, remain as important as ever.

The conference's overriding theme was *Interpretation of the Times*. A week of talks, debates, discussions and prayer was shaped around the question of how current events, from coronavirus to the Ukraine and anything in between, can or should be 'interpreted' by the church. There were presentations and open-stage discussions led by scientists, journalists and theologians, from which came a healthy stream of comments, questions and remarks from the floor.

Climate change absorbed a whole morning under the title of *Life in the Anthropocene: Facts, Interpretations, Responsibility of the Church* and was expertly presented by the eminent Professor Wolfgang Lucht, (pik-potsdam.de/members/wlucht/). He presented a harrowing diagnosis and analysis of the current state of our planet, based on the publicly available IPCC Report (<https://www.ipcc.ch>) which, in professional academic circles, is not contested regarding its veracity. His compelling talk tried to balance our Christian mandate and the hope we carry in Christ with the requirement of an urgent political rethink and resulting state approach in this area, particularly in the West where we today have the financial means to live by examples. This does not exempt us from our personal responsibilities in this area, however a big fundamental change of trajectory in terms of environment cannot come through individual action alone.

Professor Dr A. Wucherpennig, lecturer in Exegesis of the New Testament and a Jesuit Priest, spoke compellingly on the topic of God's Bitter-Sweet Word, Examples of Biblical Time Interpretations, outlining the ongoing role and place of

hermeneutics in scripture and coining the phrase 'perpetual hermeneutics' as we prayerfully approach the living word of God through scripture. He then led the assembly through an exercise of Ignatian spirituality by using Mark 3:1-6.

The overall tone of the conference was inevitably overshadowed by the current devastating events in Ukraine. We learned from our Hungarian Baptist brother that there are five border crossings between Ukraine and Hungary. Each of their church denominations, Baptist included, is manning one of these borders, meaning that as refugees cross over they are immediately provided with humanitarian and other assistance by Christians. What a witness to Christ and lived out action! Across Germany, many churches are already active in physical, spiritual and financial support to Ukrainian refugees.

The conference closed with a special celebration of communion. With every minister representing their church, it symbolised how under Christ we are all truly one body regardless of where we live.

The underlying feedback of the Germans sisters and brothers I met was that all appreciated the conference as a time for meeting and catching up with old and new friends, networking and fellowshiping.

So how is the German Baptist church structured? In general terms, an Accredited Baptist Minister goes through five years of formal study: three to BA level with a further two for a Masters. In Germany today, there is one Baptist college, Theologische Hochschule Elstal near Berlin. Since ministerial pathways are often varied, someone can become a Baptist minister if s/he has studied

theology elsewhere as long as s/he does one preparatory year at *Elstal* prior to ordination. There are also currently 25-30 ordained 'deacons' within the Baptist Union with a BA in Theological Studies and a BA in Sociological Studies, who are active on behalf of the church in a social-community capacity. It has to be said that, as in the UK, the 'ideal' pathway to ordination is constantly evolving to accommodate different permutations arising out of varying pathways. The German Baptist Union is also now in its 30 year of ordaining women ministers.

The aforementioned organising *Pastorenschaft* take the function of 'workers' representation', representing ministers in times of conflict or challenge but also instigating their ongoing further education. For this, the *Pastorenschaft* is regionally divided, each region having an elected *Vertrauenspastor* (confidence pastor), the go-to person for ministers needing confidential assistance. A church would contact the Union for operational matters whereas a minister would contact the *Pastorenschaft* for personal support.

That said, as in the German secular world, the Union and the *Pastorenschaft* work closely to ensure a seamless approach. This cooperation also includes the 360-degree profiling of ministers and churches, recently launched in Germany, to ensure the best possible match between the two when seeking or finding a post. The whole *Pastorenschaft* is run by an elected executive, the *Vertrauensrat der Pastorenschaft* (the Confidence Council of the Pastorship) and Dr Matthias Walter is co-chair; Matthias invited us to the conference.

The *Pastorenschaft* has brought out a *Leitfaden* (guideline), a broadly worded job profile outlining behaviour and responsibilities of pastors. In secular terms this is something like a Quality Assurance Definition. This was reworded and voted on during the conference with the specific aim of stemming a possible conflict of interest should a minister join a political party. Currently, as in many parts of the world, there is a national pull to the far right, which, with its anti-immigration support and rhetoric, is totally contrary to the inclusive nature of the gospel and the unconditional good news of Jesus to everyone. This *Leitfaden* aims to help ministers and churches by spelling out these potential conflicts of interests in a practical way.

Regarding spirituality, there is a separate affiliation within the church called GGE (*Geistliche Gemeinde Erneuerung*), or Spiritual Renewal of the Church and consists of members of all Protestant churches. Of the 400 ministers attending, around 45 attended the GGE meeting, which allowed time for personal introductions and expression of desire for spiritual renewal in the country through the church as the body of Christ. This meeting concluded with small group prayers with shared prophetic words.

My personal take-away was one of encouragement in the knowledge that the body of Christ is active elsewhere and it was a privilege to attend this meeting in my homeland. It felt odd representing the BUGB/BMF as a native but UK-based German; however, it was also a blessing as I could communicate easily,

understand the talks and engage with discussion, whether formally or in coffee queues and over meals.

I hope this summary gives you a glimpse of what goes on in Baptist circles in another European country. As followers of Christ and nonconformists, we have the privilege of being able to be the prophetic word of Christ in our challenged world.

The love, grace and mercy of God and the hope we have through Jesus Christ allows us to speak into current structures and strongholds through the power of the Holy Spirit, uninhibited by Christendom or post-Christendom constraints. As Baptists we have the opportunity, possibility and a mandate to go into the world shining the light of Christ.

Parson Cross

by JB

Note: this poem was written for a theological anthropology assignment by a St Hild College student

So who do you think looks like God?
Someone polite who speaks like you,
all dressed in white, all nice, unflawed?
A pastor, teacher, one to whom
the world may look and see the Lord,
the imaged God, like an advert;
perfection, only it's inert.
That's true if persons are only like you.

In Parson Cross you'll cross persons,
not nice, polite, or white or clean.
One eats cold beans straight from the tin
right by our church, where he had been,
when two young men did his head in
with hammers; now he cannot speak
and people treat him just like s..t.
They call him 'scrounger, dirty, freak,
unholy, one God would forget.'
That's true, if persons are only like you.

One lass I met sleeps in her car.
She's homeless, pregnant, 8 months
t'day;
her dad, her boyfriend, both don't care.
Ashamed of her, she's sent away;
her wrists, stepladders of scars;
no home, no hope, nothing at all.
The council call her 'unfit mum',
'cos mums like her make their skin crawl:
financially dependent bum.
That's true, if persons are only like you.

So the

Parson's cross about Parson Cross
persons, 'cos

I know a person who saw God,
and not in self-indulgent laws;
in fact, he dies a sinner, gored,
declared unwanted, all abhorred,
himself was God, defined by being
in image of those sub-persons

who died on trees, redefining

Personhood, right at the margins;
showing that, to God,

Persons

are only like him,

not treated like people at all.

The Evangelisation of the World: A Chaplain's Perspective on the Third Clause of the Baptist Declaration of Principle

by Amanda Pink

Author: Amanda Pink is team chaplain at Milton Keynes University Hospital, and was runner-up in the 2022 bmj Essay Competition.

It is the duty of every disciple to bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to take part in the evangelisation of the world.¹

When I first became aware of the Declaration of Principle on my journey towards ordained Baptist ministry, I would have understood this final clause as meaning that each Christian believer has a responsibility for proactively seeking opportunities to tell other people the story of Jesus, particularly his role as saviour, and seeking to persuade them to make a life commitment in response. As the minister of a local congregation, I sensed an expectation to find ways to do this myself, to help enable others in our community of faith to do so individually, and to facilitate the exploration of opportunities for us to do it corporately in our location. My experience was that these things were much easier said than done, especially in any satisfying, meaningful way.

I have now been engaged in hospital chaplaincy for over two years. The nature of that particular context for ministry, and the ethos and boundaries of my secular NHS employers, mean that it is now explicitly understood as inappropriate, at

least in my work life, to embody that third clause of the Declaration of Principle in the way described above.² I am not alone: at a recent online gathering of Baptist ministers engaged in chaplaincy there was a discussion about this topic and despite some differences across sectors, there was a broadly common perspective.³ What follows is an exploration of some of the ideas on this topic which I reflected on in preparation for, and after, that day.

Central to the ethos of care in the NHS is that our interactions with others should be person-centred;⁴ that is, that they should prioritise respect for the dignity, agency and personhood of the individual over other agendas that we might personally hold. This can be difficult for any health professional, especially when a person does not make choices (for their treatment, for example) that the 'experts' believe to be in their best interests. Indeed, our chaplaincy team understands it as part of our role in the hospital, along with others, to be champions for holistic personhood, which can sometimes get lost in the laser-focus of medical mindsets: not being able to see people for the bodies, as it were. It is only fair that we chaplains

are also expected to offer our ministry in a non-paternalistic way that begins with appreciation of the circumstances, values and priorities of the particular person we are serving over our own—including that of evangelism.

One reason this is particularly important in relation to care for patients is the multi-faceted vulnerability one experiences when unwell and in hospital, and the related power gap between patients and those serving them. In the most basic of terms, many patients cannot vote with their feet and walk away if they feel uncomfortable or even threatened by an encounter. There are more subtle mechanisms that come into play too; for some, a keen awareness of their dependence not just on the skills, but the goodwill, of those looking after them can create an acquiescence which is more indicative of their present circumstances than of their actual will. Crucially, for the practice of spiritual care (which usually relies very heavily upon the vehicle of conversation), a patient's physical condition can and often does affect their level of sustainable energy, clarity of thought and even—temporarily or permanently—ability to verbalise. From a different context of care for vulnerable people, Kenneth Leech makes a pertinent observation: 'One of the real dangers... is that of excessive talk, the temptation to verbal domination... By our very articulation, itself a form of power, we can seek to overcome and crush inarticulate and voiceless people.'⁵

Without appropriate awareness and mitigation, this set of factors can seem to offer an appealing opportunity to those with a strong evangelistic drive, in which

concern for those who are vulnerable can get confusingly caught up with the tantalising prospect of better evangelism.

It is for these reasons that, as a Baptist minister employed in hospital chaplaincy, I do not view the boundaries of expectation from my NHS employers and the UK Board of Healthcare Chaplaincy⁶ to refrain from active proselytisation as unfortunate 'secular' rules that I must begrudgingly abide by. In fact I embrace these boundaries and respect their wisdom as a helpful counter to the human temptation, which we must acknowledge as present in our church as much as anywhere else, to 'lord our power' over others in our reach, even under the very masquerade of service (*cf* Matthew 20:26-28), and as an appropriate way of exercising that standard of love that Paul so powerfully describes in 1 Corinthians 13: a love which does not dishonour others and is not self-seeking.

What then of that third clause of the Declaration of Principle, and in particular the signed commitment I made to uphold it as an accredited minister in BUGB? Is there a way of understanding the imperatives to 'bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ' and to 'take part in the evangelisation of the world' that is congruent with my context and my convictions?

Before proceeding, I think it is worth noting a couple of points about the Declaration of Principle itself. The first version was brought and agreed at an assembly in 1873, with revised versions following in 1904, 1906, and 1938. The third clause, under discussion here, was part of the revisions made in 1904, when

General Secretary J. H. Shakespeare argued for the structure and wording of the Declaration to be more reflective of The Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 (a move which following revisions did not counter).⁷ The influence of another prominent Baptist figure seems apparent: it was on the three verses of the Great Commission that in 1792 William Carey built his biblical case for the missionary imperative for disciples throughout the ages in *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to use Means for the Conversions of the Heathens*.⁸

It seems pertinent that the period of history from which both William Carey's efforts and the formation of the Declaration of Principle arose was one in which a colonial mindset was well-established and as yet largely unquestioned. With the benefit of hindsight and contemporary perceptive critique, we can recognise—albeit uncomfortably—the influence of the colonial assumption of superiority on the missionary impulses of this era, and the associated collusion with coercive forms of domination in the furtherance of the British Empire. Furthermore, scholars such as Christopher Wright in *The Mission of God* have very helpfully critiqued a biblical missiology which is so thoroughly founded on a single text and offered a far more comprehensive biblical understanding of mission which shifts the emphasis of mission to an endeavour which rests first in the loving character and action of God, into which the church, in emulation, is invited to participate.⁹

These critiques are not offered to challenge the legitimacy of the Declaration of Principle as an articulation

of appropriate commitments for Baptists of today, but as an invitation to allow the fullness of our history, including our awareness of its pitfalls and errors, to inform the way we suffuse these particular words with meaning now. If nothing else, the important recognition that the Great Commission is only part of the story suggests that there are different approaches for different seasons, and we do well to ask questions about what is appropriate in a post-Christendom season with all our colonial missionary baggage.

What theological resources might I turn to, as a hospital chaplain, to help me give body and substance to the third clause of the Declaration in my context of ministry, mindful of that context's particulars and history's errors and lessons?

First I might consider what meaning the phrase 'the Gospel of Jesus Christ' might be understood to convey. In the biblical accounts of Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection there are many strands that might be drawn on as relevant to chaplaincy work. Not least is the observation that the transformative work of the Spirit is certainly not limited to the patterns and constraints familiar to the established faith tradition but 'blows wherever it pleases'.¹⁰ However, that which seems paramount to me is that in Jesus, the love of God is most perfectly expressed in closely present, self-giving love, and that it is this self-giving love, in contrast to coercive domination—even verbal or ideological domination—that is at the heart of bringing salvation to others. It is my experience and conviction that the challenge and privilege of the hospital

chaplain is to bear witness to this gospel by seeking to emulate and embody it—not as a means to another end (for example, conversion) but out of the conviction that there is great value, and joy, in doing so.

In his classic, *The Stature of Waiting*, W. H. Vanstone makes the powerful and pertinent observation that in Mark's telling of the passion, Jesus ceases to be the subject of verbs—the one doing unto others, as it were—and becomes, for that crucial part of the story, characterised as the one who is 'done unto.'¹¹ In other words, perhaps counterintuitively, we find *restraint* in relation to others right at the centre of God's saving 'action.' For me as a chaplain, this idea of restraint as a key ingredient of the *missio dei* provides a crucial counterbalance to the imperatives for advancing action in the Great Commission discussed above. It is this form of embodied love that is offered each time a choice is made to lay aside the desire to speak with authority and to allow another's words to take prominence: 'Silence [that will] speak far more meaningfully than words [is that]... which knows exactly what to say, but realises this is not the most opportune time to say it.'¹²

I should say that in prioritising restraint in listening over active speech, I am not advocating for a complete holding back of my Christian identity and beliefs; a chameleon-like shape-shifting that simply mirrors the worldview and values of whoever I am with. To do so lacks integrity and is a form of disrespect of the person before me, denying them a genuine encounter with another person, and risks collusion with elements of their

perspective to which the benefit of a different viewpoint may bring liberation. For this reason, in my context, I am grateful for the wordless aid my clerical collar provides by communicating, at least very broadly, something of the identity and perspectives that I bring to an encounter without (necessarily) verbal articulation. Penelope Wilcock seems perfectly to encapsulate the task of holding this tension between genuine presence while following Paul's guiding rule to 'look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others':¹³ 'to be present but not intrusive; to keep people company but on their journey, not ours; to be authentically oneself, yet to know how to efface oneself.'¹⁴

So it is that I understand the practice of *loving restraint* not to be a hindrance to the commitment I have made to 'bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ,' but a primary means of doing exactly that. I recognise, and would want to uphold, that what is appropriate in my setting is not uniformly appropriate for all Baptist efforts in mission. Quite clearly, prioritising restraint cannot make up the whole picture of appropriate mission. Indeed, the variety of function and approach in the body of Christ provides a helpful freedom that allows me to act appropriately in my setting, trusting that other elements of the missional task, including Christian testimony, are being upheld by others elsewhere. Furthermore, I appreciate the need for the generation of both human and material resources to maintain the church structures that function as custodians of the Christian witness to the saving love of God. Nevertheless, whilst this 'economic' motivation for mission cannot be ignored (no matter how uncomfortable some of

us may find it), we must be aware of its dangers, especially given that it is also true that our missionary efforts often have been and still are targeted towards people who are vulnerable in various ways. If we are not careful we can fall into the trap of unwittingly exploiting the vulnerable for the church's own ends; it is here that an appreciation for the value of missional restraint as an expression of God's love is particularly important.

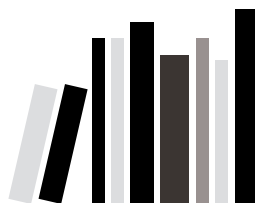
Finally, there is one more crucial way in which I understand myself, as a chaplain, to be 'taking part in the evangelisation of the world'—and that is to be committed to the ongoing work of letting the gospel of Jesus Christ speak into my own life and to bring God's ongoing transformation there. This is not intended as a neat way of shifting one's focus to allow the avoidance of bearing witness to others, but an integral part of our bearing witness if it is going to carry any weight. Chris Ellis, president of the BU in 2014-2015, prophetically offered a powerful image in which he likened our churches sometimes to shops with wonderful window displays, offering incredible wares of unconditional love, peace, forgiveness and so on but which upon entrance people find to have empty shelves.¹⁵ How true it is that it can be far easier to encourage others to follow the way that calls for death to self to find true life, than it is to keep on in submitting ourselves to that process. The particular intimacy of the ministry of hospital chaplaincy, which leaves little room to hide, may give particular focus to the need for continuing, honest exploration and commitment to growth in our own spiritual journey if we are to play a part in accompanying and helping others on

theirs, but it is nonetheless true of all in ministry—and discipleship too.

Notes to text

1. The third clause of the BUGB Declaration of Principle, as listed on the Baptists Together website: https://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/220595/Declaration_of_Principle.aspx [accessed 7/3/22].
2. As stipulated in the *NHS Chaplaincy Guidelines* 2015, 9.
3. A day for Baptist chaplains, conducted online on 24 January 2022.
4. See <https://www.england.nhs.uk/ourwork/patient-participation/> [accessed 13/3/22].
5. In Philip J. Barker & Poppy Buchanan Barker (eds), *Spirituality and Mental Health: Breakthrough*. London: Where Publishers, 2004, 73.
6. See *UKBHC Code of Conduct for Healthcare Chaplains* (Revised 2014), 8.
7. As described in Paul Fiddes, Brian Haymes, Richard Kidd (eds) & Michael Quicke, *Something to Declare*. Oxford: Whitley, 1996, 20-23.
8. Referenced in Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God*. Nottingham: IVP, 2006, 34.
9. Ibid.
10. John 3:8.
11. W. H. Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting*. London: DLT, 1982.
12. Norman Autton in Cyril Rodd (ed), *The Pastor's Problems: Foundation Documents of the Faith*. Edinburgh: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 1985, 139.
13. Philippians 2:4.
14. Penelope Wilcock, *Spiritual Care of Dying and Bereaved People*. Abingdon: BRF, 2013, 90.
15. Shared on a visit to Regent's Park College, during his presidential year, when I was undertaking my ministerial training.

the *bmj* interview



Jane Day and Helen Cameron on Project Violet

Ed: Jane and Helen, please introduce yourselves briefly, for readers who may not know you.

I'm Jane Day, the Centenary Enabler for Baptists Together. I'm also a tutor in community learning for Regent's Park College in Oxford. Alongside both roles, I'm studying for a professional doctorate. I'm Helen Cameron, a Research Fellow at the Centre for Baptist Studies at Regent's Park College in Oxford. Together we are co-leading Project Violet.

Ed: Now, tell us what Project Violet is? Who is Violet?

Project Violet aims to investigate women's experiences of ministry, while developing women ministers to understand more fully the theological, missional, and structural obstacles they face in the Baptist community; and to identify ways forward.



It is named after Violet Hedger, the first woman to be trained for Baptist ministry at Regent's Park College in 1919. She had been called to missionary work in Africa but insisted on being trained first.



In Violet's obituary it states she was:

'A pioneer in women's ministry she battled against family opposition, prejudice, emotional breakdowns and physical disability to fulfil the ministry to which her Lord called her.'

Ed: What initiated this piece of work?

JD: I became aware quite early on in my role as Centenary Development Enabler that I could spend 24 hours a day listening to women's stories and experiences, and carrying the resulting pastoral work, but without things changing. I met Helen and we started exploring the potential of research to identify systemic issues.

Ed: Tell us about the research process.

We've divided the research into separate phases. The first phase was to engage all those stakeholders within the Baptist community who shape women's

experience of ministry. We've spoken to regional associations, colleges, governance groups, and interest groups like the mission forum within the Baptist community—over 40 groups. In the second phase, we invited every serving a woman minister who wished to submit reflections about the joys and sorrows of their ministry and were delighted that 48 women accepted that opportunity. Their reflections are the foundations for the next stage. We're planning to work with up to 18 women as co-researchers, each of whom will investigate a question that is of importance to them. The final phase will be for those women's recommendations to be heard by the stakeholders, inviting each stakeholder group to respond by saying what changes they will implement to better serve the flourishing of women in ministry. You can find the detail on the project website www.projectviolet.org.uk

Ed: Has PV gone in the direction you originally expected, or has it surprised you?

HC: I'm delighted with the wide range of people who have engaged with us. We started off with an initial list of stakeholders, but we're really pleased that other groups have come forward and wanted to have a conversation with us, and to take ownership of their role in shaping women's experience of ministry.

JD: It has matched my expectations, but I've been pleased with people contacting me offering help and finding ways of intentionally furthering gender justice.

Ed: What outcomes do you hope for?

Our hope is that every stakeholder group across the Baptist family will identify and commit to changes they can make

that will enable women to flourish in the ministries to which they have been called.

Ed: What is your key message to Baptists, and how can we hear the challenge and respond?

This is not research that will lead to a report but research that will lead to action. We are relying on people to identify ways in which they can act. And there is no need to wait until the project finishes in 2024: if you can act now, then do.

Ed: How can people get involved if they have not done so yet?

If you are not already on our mailing list then do join by emailing: projectviolet@baptist.org.uk

We will invite you to our online events. As we start to feedback on the research you will be included in that. You can also follow us on social media:

Twitter [@ProjectViolet1](https://twitter.com/ProjectViolet1)
and Fb [ProjectViolet](https://www.facebook.com/ProjectViolet)

Ed: How can we pray for you?

For both of us Project Violet is just one aspect of our work responsibilities, so pray we make the best use of the time available. And pray for those who step forward as co-researchers that they will find the time for their research alongside their ministry and that people will respond positively to the changes they propose.

Ed: Thank you so much for sharing PV with us, and we will be really interested to hear anything you want to share in these pages as the project develops.

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