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# WALKING A TIGHTROPE

## Women training for Baptist Ministry\*

*Women seem to be presented in the denomination as a problem and an embarrassment, and I feel more needs to be said at the early stages of college life about the positive value of women in ministry, about the enriching that women bring to church leadership, about the women who have very successful ministries.*

(Minister's comment)

Women train for ministry in the UK in a context where traditionally men have been ministers. While for nearly seventy years there have been women ministers in the Baptist Union, they have only ever been a small minority - less than 3.5% (BU Ministry Office figures for 1988). With this in mind, this study investigates the training women receive for Baptist ministry. It appears that women in training and in ministry walk a tightrope, with the constant danger of falling one way because of opposition and prejudice, or the other because they are being moulded by masculine models of ministry which do not fit their gifts, character and perspective.

### 1 Method

Questionnaires were sent to all women ministers listed in the 1988/1989 *Baptist Union Directory*, all women students in training in Baptist colleges and to five Baptist colleges: Spurgeon's, Northern, Bristol, Cardiff and Regent's Park. The questionnaires were varied as appropriate for ministers, students and colleges but all covered four broad areas. First, *the calling and selection process*. How far does being a woman inhibit a sense of calling? Are applications to colleges by women supported and encouraged? Is equal treatment given to male and female applicants? Secondly, *college experience*. How far was this dominated by men, marginalising women? Did the curriculum consciously embrace women's issues and the insights of Feminist Theology? Thirdly, *the settlement process*. What were the experiences of women settling in churches? Fourthly, *women in ministry*. What issues do women, in particular, face in ministry, for which they need preparation in training?

The data collected through the questionnaires were supported by interviews with ministers, students, college staff and an area superintendent. Confidentiality was assured at all times.

### 2. Background

The study was informed by research and writing from a variety of sources. Denominational publications and recent writings concerning women in Baptist ministry suggest that women ministers have particular experiences not shared by men, specifically prejudice and opposition from those who see women's role in the domestic sphere (Jarman, 1986); who see women as weak leaders (Lehman, 1980); who see women as too emotional for ministry (Continuing Fellowship Working Group, 1975); who think women are unable to cope with the stress of ministry (McCarthy, 1986); who consider women to be excluded from ministry on theological grounds.

A range of papers and research from women and the Church worldwide show that women in ministry face centuries of tradition of male leadership and dominance.

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\* This paper is based on the author's dissertation for the MA in Education with the Open University.

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Women's value and potential is constantly called into question (Lehman, 1980; Foulkes, 1987; Daly, 1975). It has been further argued that women are invisible in the Church and theology, their insights being ignored and their contribution marginalised (Buhrig, 1987).

Lehman's studies in the USA suggest that women ministers are less successful in getting a church than men and that a double standard operates in that women accepted for ministry come from a higher social economic background and have achieved higher academic standards than men.

Research into women in training for ministry in the USA shows that there the great numbers of women in training have changed the curriculum, stretched the church's definition of ministry, created new styles of ministry and meant that new feminist perspectives have been included (Zikmund, 1987). However, women are disadvantaged: they are not encouraged to achieve their potential academically, they are given low expectations for 'career' paths, and their practical, 'in church' training is limited compared to the men's opportunities (American Baptist Churches, 1979).

Other studies have suggested that women are marginalised by male role models of ministry, male dominant imagery and language, and an absence of consideration of issues from a female perspective (Foulkes, 1987).

### 3 Results of the Survey

Seventy-seven questionnaires were distributed in March 1989 and fifty-nine were returned within six weeks. The majority of women spoke warmly and positively of their training as a valuable experience and good foundation for future ministry. There were, however, recurring themes which suggested areas for improvement.

On the calling and application process, nearly all, 47 (79%), spoke of having their calling to ministry endlessly questioned. The questioning came from all sides and in various ways: surprise, the assumption that their training was for teaching, outright verbal disapproval, quoting from 'anti-women' theology. The traditional male character of ministry made some women feel radical for applying: 'I skulked around feeling like a scarlet woman for a long while'. Almost half considered the interview process more rigorous for women: their calling was tested more carefully and perceived disadvantages to ministry for women, such as marriage and motherhood, were emphasised.

Marginalisation at college was not a great concern, though responses mentioned lack of opportunity to express feelings which male students did not share or sympathise with; never being taken seriously - '..... most of my remarks caused a laugh (I am not a comedienne)'; a concern that discussion would have been different had more women been involved; constant references to ministers' wives; and fear of being regarded as strident.

Respondents felt that at college they had been treated 'equally but differently'. They were encouraged to achieve their full potential, but that was seen in more limited terms than men's. It was assumed that women were training for assistant roles, not as sole leaders: 'I was always on the team, but never overall leader of anything.' A particular area of inequality was in pastoral training: 'equal academically, yes; psychologically, no'; 'academically equal, but not on pastoral issues'. Women were made to feel too emotional for the ministry or unable to cope psychologically. Their life experiences and personal skills were not seen as relevant to ministerial issues. Church-based training was another area of inequality. A number of churches refuse women the opportunity to preach and therefore deny them the wide options in training available to men. 'I was told churches wouldn't accept me. I don't think they were ever challenged.'

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As for the curriculum, few students or ministers had had any opportunity to study Feminist Theology. 44% of students said it was a small part of the optional choices but none indicated they had studied it. Only 4% of ministers said any Feminist Theology was offered in their training. The comments on Feminist Theology indicated an ignorance of the subject: seeing it as fringe, radical or irrelevant. Asked whether they had studied Feminist Theology, one answered, 'No, I am pleased to say', and another, 'I have no idea what Feminist Theology is! I have no chips on my shoulder about being included in man or brothers'. 78% of students, however, and 69% of ministers thought Feminist Theology should be included for men and women students. This was seen as an aid to women in coping with chauvinism, while men should realise there were other perspectives. The negative attitude to Feminist Theology by many who admit to ignorance of its perspective is startling. Those surveyed were mostly theology graduates or undergraduates from whom a more informed and open approach might have been expected.

Male interests appeared to dominate the curricula past and present. Examples were: women's concerns being seen as unimportant; women's interests being disregarded (for example, in a discussion of homosexuality, lesbianism was excluded as insignificant); constant emphasis on being married when almost two-thirds of women ministers are single; lack of emphasis on issues women particularly focus on, such as spirituality, counselling, pastoral care and sexuality.

On the settlement process, respondents judged that women have more difficulty finding acceptance in a church than men. Often women who find a position in a church go to situations which men are reluctant to accept, such as inner cities, or as assistants, or in churches considered unpromising or difficult because of size or history. One of the weaknesses of the study was that it only reached women who had been 'successes', who had been appointed to churches or other recognised ministerial posts or who were still at college and optimistic they would be appointed. The unknown number of women who train for ministry but never find a church or pastoral role is a cause for concern: perhaps other studies would identify them and acknowledge their frustration and hurt. Over half the ministers spoke of their gender being an issue in the interview process with churches. Questions about dress, marriage, coping with family and church pressures were put to women, when it was unlikely such questions would be addressed to a man. Women found themselves, with little preparation, having to cope with patronising attitudes, stereotype views and covert prejudice.

The fullest responses came from women actually in ministry and these were important in evaluating the relevance of the training women receive for Baptist ministry. 95% of respondents had experienced opposition in terms of being made to feel secondary, having their calling into ministry questioned, lack of co-operation, non-acceptance of women's authority, undertakers pointing out to families that the minister is female, being asked to decline invitations to preach when gender is discovered, not being allowed to make mistakes, belief in the worst rumours about women, and members of the congregation walking out of church when a woman enters to lead worship and preach. While the colleges recognised there were difficulties for women, they failed to understand the depth of hurt and stifling of potential. There was no realisation that constant opposition undermines confidence, weakens self esteem, and causes tensions in evaluating personality and potential. The responses strongly suggest that women in ministry do not enjoy the same freedom, opportunities, encouragements and range of experiences as their male colleagues.

Some of the specific needs of women in ministry and women in training for ministry have already been mentioned. Those, with the additions listed below, suggest that women have a good idea of their needs and how they could be met.

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They need help in coping with prejudice and criticism directed at ministry and sexuality; in preparing to be isolated and having no-one with whom to identify; at the domestic level, in dealing with expectations of being minister and minister's wife, if single, or, if married, in dealing with expectations of being the perfect wife, mother and minister. They need women ministerial tutors as examples and models, and leadership patterns which encourage qualities not valued by men. Colleges need to educate the churches about women ministers, challenging sexist assumptions which exclude women from full opportunities in ministry. Women ministers need alternatives to fraternalism, where they can receive support and have the opportunity to share and be understood. They need practical training specific to women's needs, in terms of what to wear at a baptism, and their roles in ecumenical relations.

Four other issues arose which did not fall under the broad areas of calling and application, college experience, settling in a church and women in ministry. These other areas were not specifically focused on, yet were mentioned sufficiently often to be important to note. These were qualifications, singleness, confusion about women's ministry and the numbers of women in ministry.

Of the ministers who replied, 11% had a Ph.D. and a further 22% masters degrees. This is a higher level than male ministers and suggests that women need to be better qualified than men in ministry, as Lehman's study (1980) of women ministers in the USA suggests.

A number of respondents mentioned the continuous assumptions that the minister would be married, with references to the minister's wife. Not only is the reference to the minister's wife a gender issue but also the issue of singleness is related to gender. 61% of ministers who responded were single, compared to less than 5% of men in ministry. Many of the assumptions about ministry and care of the 'manse family' ignore the needs of the majority of women ministers who are single. The professional and domestic spheres cannot be separated, since ministers often work from home and the family are involved in the ministry. It was inferred a number of times that it was impossible for a single parent mother to be a minister.

A thread running through the responses was uncertainty about women as ministers, and personal identity and image and the concept of femininity. Comments indicated confusion about roles and functions and the place of women ministers in the church. Over 80% of the ministers and students considered there were differences between women's style of ministry and men's. These differences were mostly in terms of the traditional qualities which are perceived as feminine strengths. Women ministers were seen as being more gentle, sympathetic, intuitive, democratic and pastorally adept; less authoritative, dictatorial and competitive, and better with people and at counselling. The colleges, however, saw no difference between women's style of ministry and men's, apart from one vague comment that maybe women ministers are more reflective and less logical. Women were afraid to be seen as formidable or strident and yet recognised the need for firm leadership. There was little evidence that women have thought through these tensions and their own attitudes. Also there were a number of negative comments from women themselves about those perceived to be trying unhelpfully to be masculine rather than being themselves: 'Women trying hard to be men - to be noticed, to be hard and bitter - switch people off' (minister's response).

The impression from the study is that women trained in a context of one woman to eight men, whereas there is one woman minister for thirty men in ministry. These statistics need verification by other studies more focused on statistical methods but nevertheless they raise a number of questions. If the number of women in proportion to men is significantly higher in training, what happens to the women upon graduation? Is it simply that women marry and find motherhood incompatible

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with ministry? Or maybe a larger number who train are never accepted by a church. This is important if women are being encouraged to fill college places with little hope of actually working as a minister.

### 4 Conclusions and recommendations

*I mean that having women ministers should not be seen as necessary for being kind to women and making them feel happy, or giving way to feminist demands, but as important for the church as a whole.*

Student response.

The findings suggest that women are disadvantaged in their training for Baptist ministry. While some concessions have been made to women in training, more could be done to ensure a full range of opportunities, experience and relevant teaching for them.

The tradition of mainly male ministers means that few women ever consider Baptist ministry and would not expect to be called into ministry. Women have, therefore, to overcome personal conflicts at an emotional and psychological level if they are even to apply for Baptist ministry. The colleges or denomination could help women address these conflicts by being encouraging and offering short introductory courses specifically to women who are thinking through applying for ministerial training. Short introductory conferences on Women and Ministry could give an opportunity to consider what is involved, be realistic about the qualities the calling requires and help individuals assess their suitability for ministry in open, thoughtful and encouraging terms.

At every stage of making an application to college, women are likely to face opposition and prejudice. They are likely to have had their 'calling' questioned repeatedly and to be asked regularly about domestic arrangements and whether as women they have the resources to cope with the task. So colleges should offer support to women who apply and have someone specifically responsible for women applicants to ensure such discriminatory practice is not repeated and that tensions are not reinforced. Few women are involved in interviewing potential ministerial students - and those who are involved are usually responsible for ensuring the prospective minister's wife is in sympathy with her husband's calling. Colleges should ensure that at least one member of their interviewing panel is a woman minister, when interviewing women for training. This would not only give the panel a more balanced perspective but also encourage the interviewee.

The system as it stands puts many obstacles in the way of women who could be effective and successful ministers. Those who complete training and survive the settlement process will have encountered opposition, prejudice and internal tensions. The process may well have made them hard, determined and possibly bitter, the kind of woman minister the denomination least appreciates.

The experience of women in training could be changed to increase its value and relevance in a number of ways. Tutorial staff at the colleges were supportive of women and valued their full participation in college life, but some male students made the women's training difficult. One college vice-principal suggested that 25% of students held theological views which did not support women in leadership or in ministry. To some male students, working through their own identity and conflicts, women students are a threat. It would seem appropriate, therefore, in an induction programme to make male students aware of gender issues, raising their awareness of stereo types and discriminatory practices. For many of the men, women as ministers

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will be a new concept, so training in relating to women as ministers would be helpful. Some exercises for all students in an induction programme or at some point early in their course on equality and valuing each person as an individual would enrich both male and female and help the women to be taken seriously. Deeply held beliefs or prejudices are not dispersed easily and therefore equality should be drawn to students' attention in imaginative and creative ways and positive, nondiscriminatory practice should be reinforced. This has been done in colleges in the USA, with an annual women's week when every activity which occurred took the perspective of women and regular awareness seminars were held. With thought and imagination, an atmosphere of trust and openness can be propagated so that equality, not sexism, is the context of learning.

'There ought to be a deeper concern by colleges that, in accepting women for training, provision is made to help women over the chauvinist hurdles they face.' This response clearly states the need for support groups or a structure of some kind to enable women to cope with prejudice. Women face unspoken assumptions about being emotionally or psychologically unsuited to ministry: this is wearing and demoralising. The existing 'Women in Ministry Group' could be developed with links into colleges to share insights and to encourage women students. One specific area which this type of group could face is the need for women to be able to admit failure or weakness. This is currently difficult since any such admission reinforces prejudice that women should not be in the ministry. A forum for learning from failure or acknowledging weakness and learning to face up to and use it in ministry would be a valuable part of college experience.

While college staff were spoken of as encouraging and supportive, some comments indirectly indicated that staff unwittingly reinforce stereotype images. There was no evidence of women being helped to broaden their thinking in terms of their ministry and to consider eventually being a senior minister with full responsibility for a large church and a team of ministers. The current church climate makes such a possibility remote but women should be considering their potential beyond present stereotypical limitations. A regular training day for academic staff covering equal opportunities and gender issues would be of great value. The colleges might then challenge churches who deny women students opportunities to preach and be a part of the process of educating churches about women in ministry and the changing role of women in the local church. There is a reluctance to question churches on their willingness to accept a woman minister. Colleges respect a church's right to reject women's ministry on theological grounds. Yet churches may not have discussed their position on women's ministry recently. A restating of the issues and current thinking by the colleges in an open and sympathetic way would be valuable in developing a more informed approach to women's ministry in the local church.

Ministerial training, like all other training, has changed drastically in the last decade and the demands to keep up with current trends and be relevant are endless. In the area of Women in Ministry, the Baptist colleges need to be alert to their responsibilities to be informed, supportive and relevant to women's needs. Feminist Theology is a recognised and valued branch of modern theology. A course on Feminist Theology is not available to any woman training for ministry; at most she can be made aware of one or two of its insights. This may account for the negative terms in which so many respondents spoke of this perspective. There are soundly argued, academically credible alternatives to currently taught theological perspectives. This discipline is wide in its approaches and the backgrounds of the scholars involved. It has, however, as its link, a concern to make central the perspectives of women and to think through issues of theology from a female viewpoint. It would appear that women ministers have been presented with a caricature of Feminist

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Theology, representing it as irrelevant, embittered, angular and strident. While a minority may be described in these terms, for the most part it is sincerely and graciously written with a concern for justice, wholeness and the benefit of the whole church. A well-taught and structured course on Feminist Theology would enrich women ministers, give alternatives to the male patterns of ministry and positive images of women as spiritual leaders.

A second curriculum issue which recurred was the emphasis on the academic rather than the practical. Academic training is integral to ministerial training: a good understanding of theology is essential. This, however, seemed to be emphasised at the expense of the pastoral application. This could represent the male emphasis on knowledge and qualifications, while women have more interest in being equipped for the task than on status. The balance of training needs to be analyzed to ensure adequate time is given to being vocationally trained: to acquiring the skills of leading, counselling, pastoring and caring, and not just academic degrees.

Other curriculum issues which arose from the survey were singleness and narrow leadership patterns. Of the ministers responding, 22 out of 36 were single, which is a high proportion. This may be because marriage and ministry are not compatible for some women or because there are more women in the church than men. It means that the ministerial pattern which is assumed to be the norm, of being married with children, is inappropriate for women ministers. Little consideration, if any, is given to being a single minister. Women ministers who are married with domestic responsibilities are also ignored in the curriculum. It is assumed that ministers, being male, will have domestic support, but women ministers with domestic responsibilities are not adequately trained; they need role models and the opportunity to consider organising their timetable and methods to suit their situation.

As for leadership patterns, many respondents felt that a specific leadership style in ministry was assumed and that it was a style men would relate to more than women. It emphasised authority, leading from the front, being firm, having vision. Other patterns of ministry and styles of leadership could be presented with which women might more easily identify, emphasising democracy, getting alongside, gentleness and servanthood. With a little curriculum adjustment, the training women receive could be more relevant to their present and future experience.

One area of change which could help women ministers is the advice they are given on the settlement process. There is evidence that colleges are more progressive in attitude to women ministers than the churches. Women may, therefore, be protected from the realities of church life while training and need preparation for the settlement process. Colleges should make students aware of the gender issues that arise in interviews and how they might appropriately deal with such questions. In particular, they should be trained to challenge sexist questions and comments in constructive and productive ways. It may also help to learn techniques for giving one's best when on trial or treated with suspicion, which is the situation in which many women ministers find themselves.

This investigation has begun to uncover some of the issues involved with women training for ministry. A more complete picture would emerge from further studies: on the differences, if they exist, between male and female styles of ministry; on the reasons why the relatively large number of women who have trained as ministers are not following their calling; on women's expectations of being a minister compared to men's; on a comparison of men and women students training for ministry; and on the most appropriate curriculum for women training for ministry.

The Baptist ministry is in general terms sex stereotyped with distinctive roles for men and women. Women are not found in the senior positions of the denomination and most women ministers are in small churches or assisting another

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minister. The church, while allowing women to be ordained, has largely kept women in a secondary role. This leads to tensions for those responsible for training: do they train women for the situation as it is, or for what it could be? Should they encourage women to think adventurously, beyond the stereotypes, in terms of roles that have until now been open only to men? This could frustrate women who, having been encouraged to develop their potential, find no place where they are accepted. It is important to be realistic about the present but true to the abilities women have, working for change and equipping women to encourage that change.

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**The Revd B. A. Packer**, *Planted by Vidler: Northiam Unitarian Chapel: A History*, 1988, 36pp. From author, 35 Ashford Road, Tenterden, Kent.

This brief pamphlet provides a unique picture of a Particular Baptist congregation which, under the influence of a youthful William Vidler, very rapidly became first universalist and then unitarian. Founded in 1788, its first building dated to 1795. Attempts to increase its capacity in its period of greatest influence in 1810 in fact effected its collapse, thus provoking the need for an entirely new, larger building. As early as 1784, beneath an external orthodoxy, Vidler confessed his difficulties both with Christ's divinity and the eternal torment of the unsaved. The visit from America of Elhanan Winchester confirmed Vidler in a universalism which made its impact on the Northiam Church in 1792, whilst Vidler was apparently still persona grata with the Kent and Sussex Particular Baptist Association, for he served as moderator in 1791 and as association preacher in 1793, the same year in which they expelled him. Ten years later the Northiam Church seems to have joined the General Baptist Assembly: by 1808 overt unitarianism had provoked an orthodox secession. Thereafter the story is one of the conscientious but less than popular faithfulness of a band of committed unitarians amidst first adversity and hostility, later giving way to apathetic disregard.

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