**‘Professional values from a previous life: excess baggage or a gift to the Baptist family?**

This paper stems from a pilot study for my PhD project which is looking into professionalism and Baptist ministry formation, with particular focus on the leading of funerals.

This project has its origins in my own lived experience as someone who was a nurse in the NHS for over 20 years, before training for ministry. My realisation was that my nurse training and my self-image as a professional, had impacted significantly on my experience of ministry formation. It caused me to ask questions about how helpful that was and what Baptist ministry formation could learn from other professional bodies and their training methods.

The structured conversations that this paper reflects on act as a pilot study for the main action research of this PhD, but also as a sounding board for some of the ideas that have emerged over the last 3 years of work.

The 3 participants were all female Baptist ministers who had previously had careers in person focussed, reflective professions, 2 in health and one in education. There were 2 recorded conversations, one with an individual and the other with 2 ministers.

The questions asked were the same for each conversation and were as follows;

1. What values were apparent to you in your previous profession?
2. How did those values affect how you trained/practice as a minister?
3. How well equipped and supported did you feel in your previous profession?
4. How did all the above compare with your experience of ministry formation?
5. How did those comparisons help or hinder your formation experience?
6. Are there any professional values you would like to see adopted in Baptist Ministry formation?
7. What was your experience of training and practice in leading funerals?
8. How did this compare with practical skills that you were trained in in your previous profession?
9. How do you feel your experience of being a female minister influences your attitude to the above?

The conversations were recorded and transcribed in Microsoft Teams. The data was first coded by using In Vivo codes, the actual words of the participants. Those codes were then collated in categories of; professional values from other people centred and reflective professions; training and practice, transferable values to ministry, contrast with Baptist ministry, the focus of leading funerals, possible hindrances and possible advantages.

The remainder of this paper will explore the themes that emerged in these categories and conclude by briefly discussing the particular implications of these ministers being female.

**Professional values from other people centred and reflective professions; training and practice**

The conversation with these ministers revealed some prominent themes in terms of professional values.

The first to emerge was that of professional boundaries. These were expressed in phrases like,

*‘being appropriately familiar’* and

*‘values of behaving well… how you act, what you do what you wear...’*

For all 3 participants there were clear expectations in their previous professions about how they behaved towards the people they served. Whether that was affording respect to elderly and vulnerable patients or the very young in a school setting. This kind of self-imposed boundary was vital in protecting the personhood of the people they served.

The next and most prominent theme was that of enabling others. All three participants talked about how their previous careers had involved empowering others to increase mobility, re-establish independence or to develop a healthy way of learning. These were profound insights which affected who these women were. One participant talked about having,

*‘flat hands’,*

and went on to explain that

*‘a flat hand on someone, it enables them…gives then agency.’*

The general ethos of all 3 participants was summed up in the phrase,

*‘because I’m not going to do to you, I’m going to do with you.’*

The theme of doing things properly and having a professional persona was very strong in these conversations. It related to both themselves and the organisations they worked for. This was encapsulated in comments such as;

*‘How I manage myself- that was already established’, ‘Behaving well’,*

One participant described herself as;

*‘I think there is something about me that wants to do it properly.’*

This holistic approach to professional practice seemed to have more of a formational quality about it. It described who these women were, not just what they did.

Supervision and accountability were also a key theme. All 3 women came from professions where they had learned how to do their job by observing, joining in, and then being observed in all key tasks.

They didn’t work without supervision and described their training experience as…

*‘When you train as a … you’re given the opportunity initially to watch someone else first and then to have a go… and then reflect on how that went. And then when you’re in post… you’ve still got that accountability …It’s a norm, so it’s not threatening at all.’*

The learning and the accountability seemed to go hand in hand for all 3 women. The theme of lifelong learning and continuous professional development was also common to all 3 participants. They talked about a culture where it was normal

*‘To show ambition’*

and that

*‘There should always be something that you’re developing in terms of your professional development.’*

**Transferable values to ministry**

For all 3 of these women the values that had defined their practice in their previous profession had found a place in their ministry. In most cases this was seen as an advantage.

*‘…some of the things that I deal with now and in my training, they don’t faze me because of the experience that I’ve had previously.’*

In all 3 cases the women found that previous experiences became crucial to ministry practice. Whether leading teams, managing budgets or trying new things, the values and skills learned from their previous professions influenced how they approached ministry.

*‘I’m constantly pulling on that experience’* was how one participant described it.

Another said,

*‘Having led a team in the NHS enables me to step into that’*

The desire to protect people’s autonomy and confidentiality was also a very strong value that transferred into ministry, and the passion to enable others seems to have been a major aspect of all their ministries. There was some discussion about whether some of these values came from their faith rather than the professional persona, and it was difficult at times to separate the personality traits shaped by personal discipleship from professional behaviour.

**Contrast with Baptist ministry**

In general, all 3 women expressed a sense of loss in ministry compared to their previous profession. This mostly was found in the lack of direct supervision. One participant said…

*‘I found it quite shocking’*

For 2 of the ministers their training had occurred in teams and that mitigated against the lack of supervision to a certain extent, but even they described a lack of intentionality about the kind of learning they were doing in the field. Although tutors were supportive the onus was primarily on the student to seek help, and support more often came from lay people in the church.

*‘… in terms of being supported in my formation my ministry formation group was key…’*

This kind of unstructured feedback and lay supervision was in direct contrast to the experiences all 3 ministers had had in their previous careers. For all of them this was put into sharp focus by their experience of doing their first funeral.

**The focus of leading funerals**

I have chosen to explore the leading of funerals in my PhD research because it provides a unique focus on professional skills, confidence and calling. It is not something that is assessed by colleges and yet it is a key task that society expects all ministers to be able to do well. When discussing this with the ministers I was amazed to find that 2 of the 3 had not even attended a funeral before leading their first one. For all of them the thought of doing something outside their competency was distressing, expressed in phrases like…

*‘All of that was completely out of my comfort zone because I had no idea what I was doing whatsoever.’*

Even though all 3 felt ill-equipped there was a sense of old skills coming into play.

*‘Something really very familiar overcame me... I’m used to doing this…Oh my- I can do this’*

All 3 ministers felt that their professional persona helped them to feel and inspire more confidence than their competency would have suggested.

*‘There’s something about having the confidence to blag it I suppose but in a way that gives other people confidence in you’*

However, this external confidence did not diminish the professional angst that they all felt, and the weight of responsibility to do this well.

*‘The responsibility that I was feeling to be able to give that woman a good goodbye without having seen how to do a good goodbye,… was quite a moment for me.’*

*‘I felt like I had a responsibility to be able to do that well on behalf of the church family, on behalf of the church… reputation, I felt was on my shoulders.’*

This conflict of professional ability and a lack of specific competence leads us to the main hindrance that comes for being a previous professional.

**Possible hindrances**

The fact that all 3 ministers talked about the need to do things properly and with respect meant that they were all potentially more stressed about doing their first funeral with no experience. For those in teams it meant that they actively sought supervision and help, but this didn’t completely mitigate for the lack of ability. Their previous standards in relation to serving people seemed to make them feel as though they were short changing the grieving families with their lack of expertise. It sounds as though all of them actually did a good job, but that they all relied heavily on previous professional skills to accomplish that. However, their professional persona was severely compromised by their self-awareness of their lack of competence.

As one minister put it…

*‘Maybe someone that’s not come from a professional background. Maybe they don’t feel that angst quite so much.’*

**Possible advantages**

Despite this insight, the positives of having professional behaviours and skills to fall back on in the absence of organised supervision in the field, generally outweighed the negatives. There was a common feeling of thankfulness for the richness of these professional women’s backgrounds and an acknowledgement that God had used their skills: that nothing was wasted. But more than this, as women, they all felt that their professional experiences actually afforded them some protection and agency in a very male space.

*‘Professionalism- if we want to call it that, I took that into the room and therefore I didn’t allow people to take advantage of me because I was a woman.’*

For all these women their professional persona enabled them to speak up for themselves and others.

*‘I think probably my professional background as a woman, it probably helps me to speak and hold the space a lot more…’*

**Conclusions.**

So, in conclusion, I want to suggest that the previous professional experiences of these female ministers were a definite gift to the Baptist family and quite possibly mitigated against a lack in direct supervision in their training. Moreover, and in particular reference to Project Violet, those experiences conferred a protection for these women that they felt they otherwise wouldn’t have had, enabling them to hold their own in sometimes hostile male environments. It is sad to think this was needed and salutary to realise that the secular professional world gave these women competencies that our Baptist formation programs didn’t. Their experiences could inform and shape how we prepare Baptist ministers more fully in the future. By understanding what made these ministers seek out supervision and support, we could capture something that could make all ministers more resilient and professionally competent. This may well be particularly pertinent for future women ministers.