

## Project Violet Podcast – Season 3 – Episode 3

### Season 3 Intro

	Music
Jane	Hello, I'm Jane Day, Community Learning Tutor at Regent's Park College, Oxford.
Helen	And I'm Helen Cameron, Research Fellow at the Centre for Baptist Studies at Regent's Park College Oxford. Together we were the co-leaders of Project Violet.
Jane	Welcome to Season 3 of the Project Violet podcast. Project Violet was a research project investigating women's experiences in ministry whilst developing women ministers. It worked to understand better the theological, missional and structural obstacles women ministers face and identify ways forward.
Helen	The research phase of the Project ended in January 2025.  Currently stakeholders across Baptist life are implementing the commitments to action that they made in October 2024. Jane and I are now focusing on the academic dissemination of the Project.  In this third season we wanted to catch up with some of the work that has been going on since last October.
Jane	We hope that listening to these episodes will help you engage with some of the outcomes of the project.

### Interview

#### **Helen Cameron**

Welcome to season three of the Project Violet Podcast. Today, I'm delighted to welcome Reverend Beth. Powney, welcome Beth.

#### **Beth Powney**

Hello Helen, lovely to see you

#### **Helen Cameron**

Beth, you're retired now, so perhaps you could start by telling us what you were doing in Baptist life prior to your retirement.

**Beth Powney**

I was extremely busy! Prior to my retirement, my job title was Regional Minister, Team Leader of the Eastern Baptist Association, which I've always said is the longest job title you could possibly find. So the outworking of that was working across Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire, and heading up a team of three regional ministers, including myself, and supporting about 170 Baptist churches across that location, and supporting them in multiple ways, depending what came up, whether that's crisis or conflict or missional thinking or seeking training, you never knew what the next email or telephone call would bring, and that's part of what I enjoyed. And then, alongside working in that locality, being a member of Baptist Together, Core Leadership Team and other national occasions like Baptist Union Council and having a voice in those places. So when I talk about it now, it sounds ridiculously huge, but that is what I did.

**Helen Cameron**

So now you're retired, what are the things you're enjoying about retirement?

**Beth Powney**

I'm enjoying the fact that I can choose to do what I enjoy in ministry. So I certainly haven't stopped working for God and using the gifts he's given me, but it's having the choice to do that which I feel most called to and which gives me life. So that's great, but still very important to keep time available for family, who I felt suffered somewhat in my ministry role. And so I have three teenage grandchildren that live fairly locally, and then two very much younger ones that live further away, and it's just delightful to be available for them. So yeah, we keep busy.

**Helen Cameron**

Wonderful. Now we first met when you were one of the Project Violet co-researchers, and so I just wonder whether you would look back over your experience of Project Violet and whether you've got any reflections about taking part in the project.

**Beth Powney**

Yes, certainly I remember when Jane asked me to be involved, my immediate reaction to her was, I'm not a researcher. Because I'm not. That's not one of my key strengths, and I couldn't bear the thought of having to do a whole load of academic, stuffy stuff. Is how it felt to me. She said, "Oh no, no this is, this is action research. It's quite different". And she told me more, and she said, "You really need to do some research to do with MagnifyYou". And I thought, Oh, all right. So I'm really glad that I did, because going through the process was so helpful in analyzing the effectiveness of the MagnifyYou project. But beyond that, it was just amazing. The breadth of topics that came up was incredible. And I learned so much from these other researchers, and they were asking questions I didn't know needed to be asked. And there I am a woman in ministry for a number of years, not realizing you even need to ask these questions. And so it was really exciting to be part of that and to see it grow, and to see the things that were coming to the surface, and all those huge number of requests for change that ended up on the table was quite incredible.

### **Helen Cameron**

Yeah, thank you for saying that. I think Jane and I one of the things that, as co-leaders, that really struck us is that questions were asked which it would never have occurred to us to ask. And so that was the richness. Was seeing what questions had been placed on women's hearts and mattered to them and facilitating them in asking those questions. Now you've mentioned MagnifyYou and that was the subject of your research, so you're going to continue to be involved in it, which is very exciting, and what we're going to move on and talk about. But for new listeners who didn't listen to your interview in Season Two of the podcast, can you just say a bit about what MagnifyYou was when you set it up?

### **Beth Powney**

It came out of a conversation between Jane and I in 2019 Jane Day and I, the first time Jane and I had met. And as a result of that conversation. I felt that the Lord pinged an idea into my brain. There was like a two-year window because of various changes that were on the horizon where perhaps, if we could develop potential women leaders, it may be a way of equipping them to step into some more senior roles. And I went away with this germ of this idea and spoke to my colleagues in the London Baptist Association and Central Baptist Association, Phil Barnard and Geoff Colmer, and said, I've got this idea. What do you think? And they went, Yeah, go for it. We'll support you as we can. Went back and spoke to Jane and said, "How about if we try to set up something that intentionally develops women leaders, where we see people that you just know have some potential". It's a really hard thing to quantify, that, isn't it, and it almost feels very pejorative to say, Well, you've got potential, but there are. There is something about certain people that you just know God wants to take them further than where they are. And so out of that was born this thing that ended up being called MagnifyYou. And we met in person for the first time in London a week before lockdown in 2020 looking back, we probably shouldn't have met, but we did, because we weren't told that we couldn't. And there were about 15 women there, and they'd all been asked to come by their regional ministers and suggested that this program, whatever it would look like, because we didn't know what it would look like, might be a good thing for them. So we met in March 2020 to explore with these 15 women if there was something that could develop their leadership skills and develop them as people and as ministers, what would you like it to look like? And we spent a day talking about that kind of thing. And then Jane and I went away and birthed, as I said, that what turned out to be called MagnifyYou which ran for two years, had to be online. As it turned out, that was never the plan. But other than three occasions, it was online, and we met every other month online and looked at the topics that the women had highlighted, and that's what I researched for Project Violet, the outcomes of that.

### **Helen Cameron**

So you said two things which I think are very powerful about what you did. The first was that it was intentional. You invited people, which is not a very Baptist thing to do. And then the second thing was that you built the programme based upon what the women said they needed, which, again, is quite counter cultural. People are very often very confident that they know what leadership development is, and they do it to people. And so it's very interesting that you took that approach of asking people what would be helpful for them, and then making it happen.

**Beth Powney**

So it's fair to say that my mentor fed into that. In talking to her about it, she said you should ask them what they need. Okay, I probably would have given something to them.

**Helen Cameron**

Okay, oh, that's really interesting. So again, that just shows the wisdom of having voices around us, doesn't it?

**Beth Powney**

Yeah, absolutely, yeah. No, that's right.

**Helen Cameron**

In some recent conversations with women, they have been using the phrase every Mary needs an Elizabeth, and that sense that there's another voice that you're willing to listen to in the background as you go through and do something for the first time.

So unsurprisingly, when we got this huge list of 57 requests for change at the end of Project Violet, one of them was for associations to continue to offer intentional leadership development for women, and you've been part of picking that up. So could you just say what's happened next? Then you and Jane delivered this program, this first program, and then there's, there's been a recommendation request that it continue. So what is it that's happened?

**Beth Powney**

I think there's, I think what you're asking is, what's, what's happened in the association where I'm at, is that right? Just well and collectively, I think because you've been asked to be part of taking it forward, haven't so I can probably answer it on two levels, really. So I'm now part of a different Association because I now live in East Sussex, and so I've had conversations with the regional team here to say, how can we roll this out in this association? Because they don't have a female regional minister. They would like to, but they haven't, and so I've been part of pulling together a group of women ministers, four of us that that can be available across this very broad Association, geographic. It's very spread. I've been having conversations with cluster groups about how they feel about the Project Violet recommendations and what their queries and concerns are. I've been working proactively at gathering together the women ministers across this association, which is something they weren't in the habit of doing just because it's good, just to spend time with each other and share and be in a space. I remember this phrase being used at MagnifyYou being a space where you're allowed to be around the table and nobody's questioning it, whereas often when you're in a space which is male dominated as a woman, you can feel like it's probably unintentional and part of the men, but you can feel like you may not have right to be there. So by gathering women together, well, you just know you have a right to be there, and

that therefore is out of the way and changes how you interact and how you share, so that on association level is part of the way I've been involved in offering intentional development for this association.

**Helen Cameron**

Yeah, fantastic.

**Beth Powney**

And then the other question, I guess, is the next phase of MagnifyYou which has risen up. And I say it's risen up because that's not something I've intentionally been involved with. I felt as I retired that it was right that I handed that over, handed the baton on, and when we had the final retreat of MagnifyYou Jane, and I said to the ladies there, we have done this, and this is what God called us to do. If you feel it should continue, we pass the baton on to you. Because neither of us felt we should just repeat it for the sake of repeating it. I think that's a mistake we can easily make, but because something's worked, we need to do it again. That may or may not be true, it's important to reflect and decide, is it right to do it again? And what rose out of that were two of the women who had been on MagnifyYou and who are now both regional ministers, felt 100% they wanted to pass on what they had received. And so one of those being Lisa Kerry, got in touch with me and said, "How much would you be willing to be involved?" And I said, "I don't want to run it, but I'm happy to be a voice and to share with you in it". And so there is a new cohort of MagnifyYou, which is going to start on the second of September.

And we have a cohort of women that spreads nationally, this time from the majority of the associations across the UK, and it is three or four women from each association that have been nominated. We have met once in Baptist house and it's over 30 women. I'm not entirely sure what the number is. Now, that's incredibly exciting. And as I stood at Baptist house and saw this group of women, I just felt incredibly emotional, because, wow, look what God has done, yeah, look, look what the ripple effect has been, yeah? And that is just so marvelous, because all I felt I was asked to do was to drop a pebble in a pond, and what I stood there and saw was the ripples, and it's marvelous. So yes, what else would you like me to say about that?

**Helen Cameron**

So there's this second cohort has been brought together, and they're going to be having a program of meetings over the next couple of years and but driven forward by three women regional ministers, which is, again, it's just really, really encouraging. What are your hopes? You've been on the shoreline, you've seen the ripples coming towards you. What are your hopes there for this second cohort of women?

**Beth Powney**

I think one of the key things that came out of the first MagnifyYou and the research that I did was how, and it was all very much based around giving these women the opportunity to hear the

stories of other women who have gone before them and who were in senior roles in various aspects of ministry, and one of the big effects was how it increased their confidence and the realization these women are just like me. They've just happened to have taken this step. Yeah, and that sounds such a simple thing, but the change that it makes in your head is huge. It's absolutely massive. And so I think my hope would be the same for this cohort in that that they just see something which is beyond themselves. However, in talking with Lisa Claire and Mary about the organization of this second program, I said the actual the landscape is now different, which is really good. The landscape is different because we have a significantly higher number of senior female leaders across the Baptist together now, and therefore the landscape is different. So it's important we don't repeat exactly the same thing or expect exactly the same outcome but recognize what is needed for this landscape. What did this group of women need? So I don't know how to answer that question. The women gave us some thoughts when we met for that day in Didcot. But therefore, what will the outcome be? I don't know, because it should be different, still good, still exciting, I'm sure. But I believe it will be different, but if at the end of the day, it enables these women to move forward confidently in their God given scope of leadership, then it's done its job.

#### **Helen Cameron**

Thank you for that. And so thinking, perhaps more broadly, about the impact of Project Violet, do you have some sort of hopes and visions for what you'd like to see happen? You've obviously been active and encouraging your regional association to reflect on the findings and respond. Have you got a sense of that wider impact of the project?

#### **Beth Powney**

I'm not sure I've got a wider sense of the impact, partly because I'm now more detached from National Baptist life. I think I have a concern that, like a number of things that the Baptist family have done over the years. It lodges on a shelf somewhere. I think there's enough people that don't want that to happen that that probably won't happen, but it is a concern. So it's a concern about keeping the momentum and not letting it get forgotten, because the next big thing comes along, because there's always a next big thing. There always will be, and there's still huge other areas of inequality and injustice that need to be addressed. So my hope and prayer is that it keeps its momentum and therefore keeps its fruitfulness. But I think, like many of the best Baptist things, it has to rise up from underneath. And when I was praying about what, what does it look like for the association I'm in now? So this is nearly two years ago. Now, I have this picture of a bubbling stream, you know, a beautiful stream that's going through a lovely woodland. And where you see the fruitfulness is along the shoreline of that beautiful bubbling stream. You see the little flowers emerging and the ferns growing. And, you know, you see life. And I just had a sense that this is more like that bubbling stream now the lifeblood flowing through Baptist together, because the women on the grassroots level know they have a voice. That's what's so important. And change has to come from that place, not from the voices of whatever hierarchy we've got saying, Thou shalt change, because it doesn't work, does it? And change has to come from within. And so, yes, I hold on to my picture of the bubbling brook in the hope that that's what the Spirit of God will fulfill.

**Helen Cameron**

That's a wonderful picture, and it's so much in tune with action research as a way of bringing about change, having taken some action, people see that action is possible, and then that emboldens the next person to take some action. And it does become a stream of activity, which then, as you say, enables things to new things to blossom and bloom, and which is, yeah, wonderful when those signs appear, and it's been great in this third season of the podcast to have people on talking about the various responses they've made and the things that they they've done. So as you said, we're in a new situation now. There is a new cohort of women in positions of leadership. There's a sense of women's voice growing across the Baptist movement, if you were talking to a woman, and I'm definitely not going to say young woman, because very often it is mature women who responding to the call to ministry. So a woman of any age who was exploring a calling, what are the kind of things that you'd want to say to her about today's context,

**Beth Powney**

I'd always say, Don't ignore what you think might be a little nudge that. Don't ignore it. Talk to someone, because I still think we're very prone to saying, well, that couldn't be me. So voice what you think God might be saying early, and if you don't feel there's a safe place to take that in your church, there will be somebody in your association where it is a safe place. And even if you don't know who that is, your regional team know who that is, so voice how you feel and allow others to walk with you through that discernment, even if the discernment ends up as No, that's not the right way, that's absolutely fine. But the sooner you respond to the nudge, the sooner you can discern whether it's right or not. It doesn't have to be a quick thing, but the having someone walking alongside you in that because the internalization of that call, which so many women have internalized, sometimes for years, just puts a massive delay on the fruitfulness of the ministry that could be there. And whereas it hasn't necessarily been safe to voice that, I think it is much safer, and safe spaces can now be found much more easily. So I think that's the main thing I would say is find your safe person to talk to, because they are out there.

**Helen Cameron**

Thank you. Well, that feels like a really positive place to end our conversation. So thank you very much, Beth for agreeing to come and take part in this podcast,

**Beth Powney**

You're welcome, Helen and thank you.

Season 3 Outro

<b>Helen</b>	Thank you for listening to this episode of the Project Violet podcast.
<b>Jane</b>	We invite you to go to the website if you want to learn more about the Project. <a href="http://www.projectviolet.org.uk">www.projectviolet.org.uk</a>
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