

Project Violet Podcast – Season 3 – Episode 4

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.
Jane	In this episode we are delighted to welcome Ken Benjamin as guest presenter. Ken is a Baptist minister and Director of Church Relationships at the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity.
Helen	Ken offered to engage with the issue of women's experience of leading larger Baptist churches.

Ken Benjamin

Thank you so much for joining us for this discussion on Project Violet. As we jump in, I'll introduce myself and the three people I'm interviewing straight away. So I won't repeat that here, just to say that it was such a privilege doing this, the contributions from all three friends were so poignant and helpful that this has ended up being two podcasts of around 25 minutes, not just one. So at the end of part one, I'll jump in again, and hopefully you'll have heard enough to want to listen and download part two – Episode 5. We hope you enjoy it. We're praying this is helpful and hopeful to many.

Hi everyone, and welcome to this podcast for Project Violet, looking at the particular issue of women leading larger churches, particularly thinking of larger Baptist churches. And I'm delighted to have three friends with me to do this, Ali Summers, Lisa Holmes and Ellen Wild and just to introduce them, just very briefly, and then we'll spend most of our time hearing from them. Ali Summers is the senior minister of rising Brook Baptist Church in Stafford, and has been since July 2022, and is one of the leaders of fresh streams. Lisa Holmes is one of the national leaders for Scottish Baptist but prior to that, was at Skipton Baptist Church, and was lead Minister between 2013 and 2021 and Ellen Wild is in Chichester Baptist Church, coming to us from Chichester Baptist Church has been there since 2011 and has been the team leader there since 2021 and is one of the core leaders of the larger Baptist Church network, which is a great connection as well with this theme. And we've said together, we could discuss this in many, many different ways, but the format that we've chosen is a really simple one, yay, nay and may. It's a bit cheesy but go with me on this. Yay, nay and may. Yay, what are your Yays? What are you really positive about, about being a woman leading, or having led a larger Baptist Church? Nay - what are the negatives? Let's be honest about what the difficulties and challenges and problems and May - what are your hopes, aspirations, prayers, even for women lead leading larger Baptist churches going forward and as much as possible, just jump in and talk to each other, as well as me prompting you with any questions. So maybe if we start with Ali say on the yay Ali, what are the positives about being a woman leading a larger Baptist church?

Ali Summers

I think for me, one of the things that I love about it is I get to lead a large team, a large staff team, as well as loads of volunteers. And I've been in the church since 2003, so I've been a minister at that point, leading different areas as the years have gone by.

So I know lots of people. I've seen all our staff. I'm the longest serving member of staff now, there was one that retired at Christmas, but so that that means that I've seen all their journeys, and it's just such a privilege to lead that team, to see those people develop and grow, to bring new people onto the team, when others move on, to have some of our younger adults as interns. And there's just that life and vitality of a larger staff team that is just really exciting to be part of and to lead. And I love that about big church, in that sense.

Ken Benjamin

Lisa and Ellen, you're nodding. Do you want to jump in on that?

Ellen Wild

I guess I just want to reiterate that in a way, it does feel a privilege. I deliberately am called the team leader, because the greatest joy for me is leading the team. And I think I'd want to say that, yes, there are lots of challenges in leading in a larger context, but actually I have people around me, because I have a team who do fill some of my gaps. And I was reflecting that if you lead in a smaller church, it's hugely challenging. If you are the sole minister, actually, you need to cover so much. Whereas I am very privileged that I do have admin support and I do have a finance team and people who do things I don't and have expertise in areas where I don't, I have a lot of gaps. And rather than thinking because I have lots of gaps, I can't lead a larger church. Instead, I have lots of gaps, so perhaps I ought to lead a larger church where there's a team of people who can do some of the things that I can't do. So I really agree with you. Ali, I think leading the team that I have is my greatest joy, and one other thought then, then, Lisa, you what do you think. But I also sense a real privilege in the carving of a new path. The reason we're doing this podcast is because there just aren't many of us who lead in a larger context. And yes, I'd love there to be well-worn paths that I can follow, but there aren't. And rather than being frustrated about that, actually it's a bit of a privilege, I suppose, to be part of changing a narrative, changing a culture. There's a whole generation in my church, who just, they just don't know any different, because they've never seen any different. And there's a there's a joy in that, isn't there. There's a privilege that I can't change the world. But in my little corner, there's two ministers, one male, one female, and our kids, teenagers, young adults, don't think anything of that at all.

Ken Benjamin

My daughter and my daughter in law they've grown up knowing a brilliant minister in Ellen Wild, and just that's the natural thing that they've assumed is the norm, until they've traveled elsewhere. Yeah,

Lisa Holmes

Absolutely. I entirely agree with what you've both said, and I think there is a privilege in being a pioneer. I mean, people used to say, oh, you're a pioneer, and I feel like the least pioneering person in the world. I think I'm way too cautious to be a pioneer, but just following God's leading in my life, day by day and ended up being accidentally a pioneer in this kind of role of senior leadership within a Baptist church. And I just kind of want to say yes to everything you've said. You know, we had young girls and young women into the church, being called into ministry because it seemed entirely normal. The role model piece is hugely important, isn't it? And I just love the team thing as well, you know? And I guess as you become the senior leader, sometimes you end up picking up things that are more challenging, that are part of the role of having a kind of overall responsibility, but at least you're probably not then trying to do everything else and you can, to some degree, pick and choose if that's the appropriate way of putting it. You play to your strengths, can't you and equip and encourage other people to do that. I mean, it was just a lot of fun. There were some quite difficult bits and it's that kind of pioneering privilege piece, which is often being in rooms with a lot of men, because that's the nature of senior leadership. But sometimes that means you get noticed. And I sometimes felt for some of my colleagues, who just became overlooked because there was like loads of them all looked entirely the same, and to have a voice into a different sphere is a real amazing opportunity as well, isn't it?

Ken Benjamin

Hmm, that's interesting as well. So you might get an extra notice or extra voice, and you right now, all of you have answered the question, either from the point of view of the yays generally, of leading a larger church. And we haven't defined larger church, by the way, I think that's fine. Sometimes Baptist together define it around 180 plus. Often it's defined the way you've defined it. By the time you're big enough to have a team, you're kind of a larger church. Sometimes it's churches with 200 plus. It doesn't really matter, from the point of view of our discussions, but some of the advantages you've named generally, and some are specific to being a woman leading a larger church. And I guess I could speak to the general point as well in in that sometimes you can just try things, have a go at things in a larger church, and it's a bit safer to do that. Great answers. Any other yays before we move on?

Ali Summers

I think one of the things that is great, what I what I love about our churches, you've got the beauty of the big and the small and when you've got a larger church, that can be like a resource hub. Like you say, you can pioneer other things. You can try other things. You can do a little church plant. Or we have Susan, who leads this fabulous deaf community, you can do those things because you've got more resource with a bigger church to be able to do it and so it's, it's not that one is good and one is not so good. Large and smaller, both great, and you and both have different opportunities, and both work really well. But I think the one thing about a large church is you've got that resource hub that lets you do the small, lets you do the pioneering, and lets you do all those things, which is, is just great opportunity to have

Ken Benjamin

Brilliant, brilliant. Well, go on Ellen.

Ellen Wild

I was just reflecting on that, Ali, the kind of large and the small and the benefit of that, I just wonder as well whether there's something about the kind of the current cultural climate that we're in, that the one of the yays and the privilege is also to do with the way that leadership style and approach is changing. So I feel quite privileged, in a way, to be leading at a time when there's a lot of questions, over institutional models, where influence comes through role and position, and not just in church, in business and other charities and communities and schools and so on, that actually there's a dissatisfaction with previous models of leadership. And in all that you've described, I was just thinking to myself, gosh, we're leading at a time when the kind of leadership style that maybe many women lean more into is actually the kind of leadership that people are looking for. More something that is more collaborative. And we talked a lot about team and releasing people and less top down. Well, actually, often women lead in that way, lean in that way. So if you were talking about the large and the small and the you know, the privilege that we have to be pioneers, we are leading at a time when I think people are looking for the kind of leadership that maybe women might bring. And so if we're talking before we get onto the nays and the hard stuff, we are absolutely not saying that larger church is better. You know, smaller churches can be just so, so hard. We just want to wave a flag to say this isn't just possible, it can also be life giving and fun, and also that we have got something significant to contribute as women that is really important in this time and in this moment.

Ken Benjamin

Thank you for saying that. We're not saying that larger churches are more important or more significant ministry at all, but you also have a good counterbalance there. And I guess that was one of the prompts for me to ask to be able to do this podcast with the three of you as chair of Trustees for one of the colleges, one of our Baptist colleges. And I was speaking to a couple of brilliant women ministers in training who've kind of ruled themselves out of ever leading a larger church, and that may be their calling, and if it is their calling, that's absolutely fine to lead a smaller church. Whatever your calling is, it is your best calling. But they've led larger organizations, they've had responsibilities elsewhere. And if God is calling them to a larger church, then for all the reasons, you've said, Yay to there are wonderful opportunities, and it's a it's a great ministry, if that's what God has called you to. So hopefully this will be useful to some who might be in that in that category. With that in mind, then let's think about some of the nays and some of the things that you wish weren't the case. I could start with any of you, but let's start with Lisa.

Lisa Holmes

Well, I think the biggest challenge, well, I don't know, there's a whole bunch of biggest challenges. One of them is the one that's inside your own heart. I think actually, just getting over the starting line is hugely challenging for a lot of women. I grew up in a church that probably didn't really have women in senior roles and leadership, but there were women who did stuff at the front. So I wasn't terribly aware that I probably was doing something that perhaps didn't fit with the structures. But I remember saying to God, no, you don't want me to do this because I'm a woman. And have you not read the Bible? You know there was that sort of personal bit of like, I don't think that I can, I mean, there was some personality stuff around that as well, but, but they're kind of getting over the front bit of the journey, and even putting your hand up and saying, I think I might be called, depending on the context you find yourself in, is immensely difficult before you even get on to the next bit, and then actually getting your first job, I think, is also the next challenging piece.

And it I'm sure it's a little easier than it used to be, but I think when I started in Baptist ministry, something like the maximum was 7% of all ministers were women. So just actually getting a job to even get started requires people to be willing to open some doors for you, to take a chance. And often that comes out of relationship. But you got to have the relationships before that happens. So I think those things have been quite difficult for a lot of women.

And I would say that over overwhelmingly, I have quite positive experiences with one particularly challenging, negative one, but you can end up feeling very discouraged and without carrying a lot of hurt if you've had a lot of difficult experiences, and I think that if you do go around carrying a lot of hurt, it only makes things more difficult for you. So is it that's kind of cycle that that I think it's easy to get on? And I suspect that's not unique to women, but I think it's particular to women with regard to leading. So that's just a couple of things,

Ken Benjamin

Good, helpful. Ali?

Ali Summers

I think my journey is, is a little bit different in it to Lisa's. In that sense, I grew up in a Methodist Church. So there were women, you know, at the front. I didn't really think anything different around that. And then I went off to university, was part of the Christian Union, and that was the first time that I really hit a whole thing of, in the UCCF at the time, there was the whole thing of women can't lead. I remember having a conversation with somebody in regional leadership saying, We think you'd be great to be leading the CU, but you can't because you're a woman. Oh, oh, okay. So they said we'd like you to lead the mission committee instead, because you can do that. That was my first encounter with it. And then I went into teaching, I always felt a huge call into leadership of some way and everything in school, and my first head teacher, and all of that was pointing to like, Oh, you're going to be a head teacher, and this is going to be the journey. And then it was sort of 13 years later that God had other plans. And by that point, I was in Rising Brook church. And so it was appointment from within, because people in the church saw that, and there was a whole sort of few years of calling and local appointment within that and a journey. But I feel, when I listen to some other women's stories, a huge privilege of people who just gave me a safe seat at the table and a different journey into it. And so I have had interesting conversations and interesting challenges along the way, but not the horror stories that I've heard from some women, as you said, you know, Lisa, to even get through the line into a first role.

Ellen Wild

If we're thinking particularly about the nay in terms of leading in a larger church, I think it is good to reflect on the fact that if this does feel like a really significant sticking point for our Baptist family. So you know, why are we on the screen? It's not because we were like Ken's favorites. It's because there wasn't many to choose from.

Ken Benjamin

I'd like to say both, but...

Ellen Wild

There are very, very few women doing what we are doing. And I'm delighted that more women are coming in to train, and I'm delighted that we're seeing a real sea change in the number of women moving into regional ministry. I think that's really encouraging and to be celebrated. But where we're not really seeing any change is women breaking through whatever the barriers are to leading in a larger church. So if we're talking about yay, nay and may, I think a big nay has got to be 'why are more women not doing this?' I do think some of it is what you say, Lisa, about how easy it is to count ourselves out. I've done that. But of course, the reason we count ourselves out is because that whole thing of you can't be, what you can't see, feels true. So when I felt called to this role, one of my big problems was that I believe theologically, women can do this, but they are not doing it, and there must be a reason why. So why should I think I could do it? I do wonder, if we're talking about larger churches, I think a really key issue that's only going to be overcome through modeling and prayer, and a culture change is to do with unconscious bias. I don't think the theological problem is that big a deal. There is some of that. And there are some churches that it is their stance and that I've got loads of grace for that. That's your view, your understanding of the Scriptures. No problem. The problem is in churches that say, in theory, on their profile, of course, will have a man or a woman, but the reality of it is that they don't really mean that, and it isn't theological. It's unconscious bias, and I just feel like I've seen that quite a lot, so there's no reason why larger churches wouldn't appoint a woman into a senior church in a senior role in a larger church, but because there aren't any well worn paths or any models, or because our leadership style might be different, or whatever, unconscious bias kicks in, and churches look to fill those gaps with the kind of male framework that they understand. So I think that's a really significant barrier, and it is interesting just to know that all three of us were a second minister on a team in a church who then loved us, respected us, saw leadership in us, and so therefore were willing to appoint us. If a larger church is looking for a new Minister, how many would appoint someone like us? From cold, so to speak?

Lisa Holmes

I think that's so wise. We were just really observing that that was our reality, was being known and trusted, and therefore could be trusted with that next level of leadership, and probably something in us as well of saying, well, actually, I can step up to this, because it's only one step up.

You know, it feels like that, whereas it changing to another church and a senior role, it feels like a much bigger move, doesn't it? I just sense a kind of caution, I think, in there, and maybe it's something about my context. But I think in the way that we feel that there's been some significant change in terms of the opening and possibility of women in leadership, which might even mean senior leadership, there's also a bit of a pendulum swing the other way. And I think we're seeing quite a strong resurgence, I suppose, of kind of the male role, which perhaps has just felt a little undermined. And I understand there's reasons behind that, but both in the secular sphere and also in the church sphere, and that just makes me sad, really. I think one of the lovely things about leading in the larger church is very often you get to model what women and men leading together looks like and maybe there's also a generational thing that you get to model. But something about that is so beautiful to see, and I feel sad if we're sort of the possibility is at the point where we're starting to see real shift and change, there's a kind of pendulum swing back the other way again. I certainly see that around me, and we see it somewhat in the States as well. I don't want to be too much of a generalized person about that, but I do think it's something in that nay zone that concerns me.

Ken Benjamin

So just thinking about that nay element and the fact, as you observed Ellen, that you've all come from being existing ministers in a church, and therefore known, so maybe some of that unconscious bias thing is overcome. But between us, we don't know many, if any, examples, of women leading larger churches straight into that role, is some of it like another layer of complementarianism, like a soft layer so? And this could be unconscious, but the idea that, yes, women can be ministers, but the sort of ministers that they are is caring, pastoral ministers, and that suits a smaller church. It doesn't seem the gift set suits a larger church. Is that part of it? And it's another Nay. I don't want to invent nays that you haven't experienced. It's easier in a large church for there to be a subgroup that may not be very large, but can be very vocal, and it's hard to kind of get on top of. And if they're not for you at the point that you're coming into post, that can be a huge thing to overcome, because you're not at that point in Baptist life, you're not voting yet. So you don't know how big that group is, but it feels very big, because there's something of the dynamics of a Baptist network that makes it easy for a few people to sound like they're the majority.

Ali Summers

I mean, I think that the reason the three of us have had that journey is it does go back to the trust thing.

I think we have to acknowledge that the churches that we have ministered in, you've almost proved your way. I don't like that phrase, but I think you have, you have proved your way. And so, you know, I've, I've had various comments along the way, like, well, I don't, you know, I don't really go with women, women leading larger churches, but, you know, I think Ali can, you know, I think she can, sort of, I think she's proved she can do it. That sort of a comment, and I think that has come from those, all those years of building relationship of trust, and even when you have got folks in your church who may have been outspoken on it for well, for me, maybe been outspoken on it a number of years back, more before my time, almost when you have been the person who has walked alongside them as they've lost people in their family. You've done that. You know, you take funerals, you walked alongside them. There has been that pastoral well, they see you differently. There is, I think, that comes out of relationship and trust building. But it is sad that it takes that, it takes moving, moving your way.

Lisa Holmes

Yeah. And I would agree with everything you've just said, Ali and also with this kind of soft complementarianism. I mean, you know, most complementarians believe that women can lead in certain contexts. So you know that it's not against women in leadership. It's particular context and I think there's something that sneaks in, which is around the kind of male headship thing. So it's sort of worked out in a way that was totally fine. You can do absolutely whatever you want to, but it's good to have a man in the chief seats, because that makes everyone feel secure. And I think it's something about that headship piece that probably nobody can necessarily explain terribly well, but it just makes people feel secure, because that's how the world works, doesn't it? That's how it's supposed to be. And so that's quite difficult to deal with. It's quite nebulous, it's quite an emotional space, and I think that's often what people are saying in a church meeting when they can't think of anything specific to say. It's just that I just feel a wee bit uncomfortable with this, and I just not sure how this works, and therefore I'm not for it, but I don't really know why. Just doesn't seem quite right. It's not the natural order of things, that feeling.

Ellen Wild

All that you've just described, the soft complementarianism and all of those, all those examples, is exactly what unconscious bias is, actually, isn't it?

This doesn't this doesn't sit quite right, or it doesn't feel quite right to me. To take your point, Ken about, you know, in a Baptist church as well. I mean, I'm a Baptist for a reason, and I believe in this, and I'm so grateful, actually, that I know that I'm in my church with an enormous endorsement from the church that's really important to me. But of course, the challenge is, if we're talking about bringing about change, actually, the culture change does need to be in the whole church, because it's the whole church that discerns. So it's not like other streams, where leaders appoint leaders and they might say, Here's your here's your woman for the role, we don't have that. We don't have anybody saying it. You know, Ellen, she's coming to lead your large church, that large church have got to decide together. That I'm the right person, and so no wonder, in some ways, it's a bit more challenging. Your point, Ken's interesting about powerful people, because I think that is that is true to one degree. I do wonder also, though, that there's a dilution that can take place in larger churches. I think if you're a smaller church and you've got a powerful couple, for example, a few powerful people, their voice can also be magnified in a different way, perhaps. And this, I'm quite grateful sometimes that people speak strongly in my church, but they're, they're diluted by, you know, quite large. So proportionally, they're not that enormous, you know, but, but you're right because of the discerning together and the Baptist way of doing things, their unconscious bias, the soft complementarianism, all of those things make being the lead minister as a female just so much, so much harder.

Ken Benjamin

Yeah, you're absolutely right. Ellen, it could be even harder in a smaller church, I guess, for other reasons I guess I was just thinking sometimes it sort of feels hard to keep track of in a larger church, like, where is it and who are? Who is this group? Whereas in, if you're in a church of 20, sort of know who?

Ellen Wild

Yeah, that's very, very slippery. People are slippery in big churches, yeah,

Ken Benjamin

That's where we're cutting Part One, I hope you'll join us all now in streaming or downloading. Part Two of this interview – Episode 5.

Season 3 Outro

Helen	Thank you for listening to this episode of the Project Violet podcast.
Jane	We invite you to go to the website if you want to learn more about the Project. www.projectviolet.org.uk

