

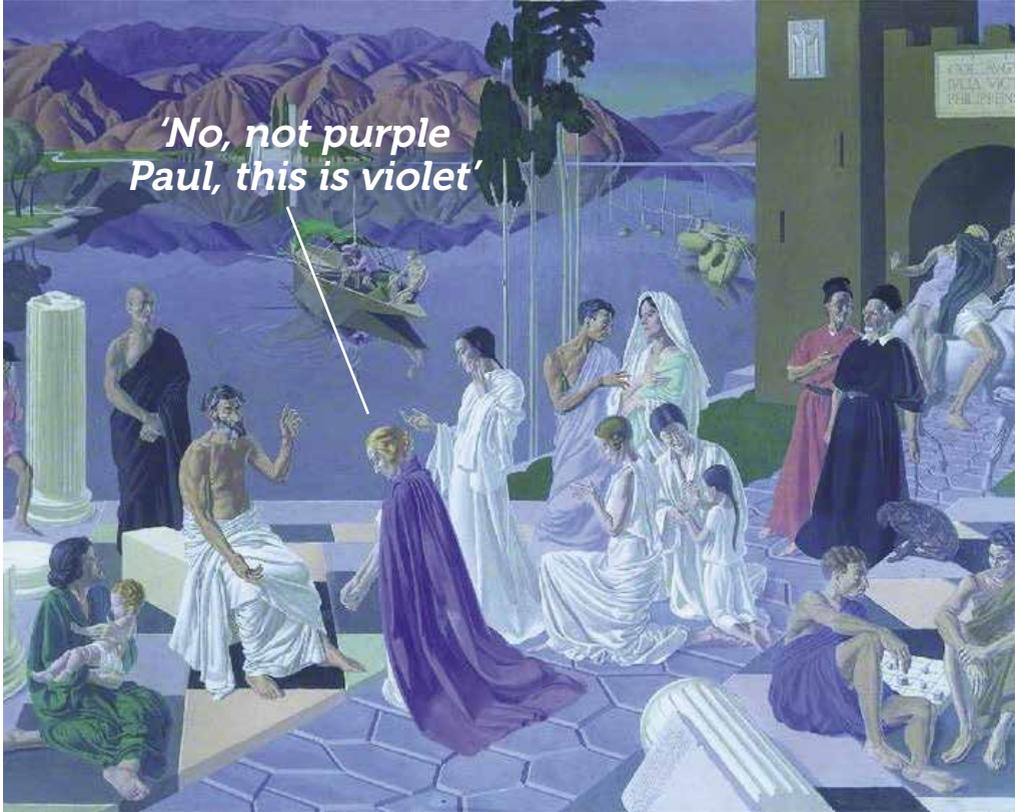


MISSION

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CATALYST

Intelligent comment on faith and culture



The defiance of unquiet women

SINGING A NEW SONG

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Contributors
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Pastor Jyoti Ratna is on the faculty of the College of Christian Theology Bangladesh. She is now studying for her MDiv in Theology at the Philippines Baptists Theological Seminary.



Rev'd Dr Amutha Deveraj is the lead minister at Ashurst Drive Baptist Church on the north-east edge of London. She grew up in India, comes from a Hindu background.



Dr Valérie Duval-Poujol is a French baptist theologian and Bible translator. She is involved in the fight against domestic violence and is the cofounder of the website standagainstdv.net



Ttendo Miller is a Ugandan lawyer and a graduate of Makerere University, and the University of Dar es Salaam. Since 2022, she has been BMS World Mission's Gender Justice Co-ordinator.



Jesse Johnson is a Ugandan photojournalist. A childhood toying around with his dad's kit inspired Jesse to buy his first camera - a Canon 1300D - with money made from making bricks.



Debora Röhl is a language specialist who has spent over half of her life outside her country of origin, Germany. She is a restorations trainer and MA student at Comunidad de Estudios Teológicos Interdisciplinarios.



Revd Dr Simon Woodman is the Minister of Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church. He champions radical values and inclusivity while collaborating to bring about transformation.



Nana-Natalia Lester-Bush leads work on equity, diversity & inclusion. She was born & raised in England by a Ghanaian mother, English father & very English, very Anglican grandfather.

SHINING VIOLET'S LIGHT ACROSS THE GLOBE

Inspired by an investigation into women's experiences in ministry, this issue holds in tension celebration and lament



The BMS World Mission Gender Charter is one of the saved tabs on my work browser. It proved a necessary earthing point as this issue was birthed. Its theological reflection owes a debt to Baptist scholar Revd Dr Stephen Holmes but its translation into seven new languages and spread of adoption across the globe owes an even greater debt to Ttendo Miller, one of the contributors.

The Charter, a document that sets out BMS' commitment to address issues of gender injustice across all areas of our work, contains five core convictions. I kept two stuck to my screen on Post-its: "...that Jesus Christ is the one perfect example of a counter-cultural life lived in a patriarchal society" and "...that the lived reality of patriarchy in many parts of the world limits, stifles, threatens and ultimately damages the lives of women".

This issue owes its own debt to the wisdom of Revd Jane Day, Project Violet co-leader. Before birthing there must be conception and this issue was conceived in the light of Project Violet, an extensive investigation of women's experiences in Baptist ministry. The

project has helped understand more fully the theological, missional, and structural obstacles women ministers face in Great Britain and identify ways forward.

In a recent conversation between Jane, myself and Ttendo, Jane said, "I have moments where I think it feels insignificant, and maybe even minor compared to some of the challenges that women face in other parts of the world. But I do come back to this idea that, 'where there is injustice anywhere, it's a threat to justice everywhere'. If I had a pot of money, which I don't have, I'd love to be able to model this process across the world for women."

What could that look like? How could the lens of women in ministry in a UK context be widened both to celebrate how women are serving God where BMS is present across the globe and to shine a light on the 'stifling' and 'damaging' injustices faced by women who faithfully follow God's call on their lives? This issue is a response to those questions.

Matty Fearon
Mission Catalyst editor



TRY TELLING GOD HE'S NOT CALLING WOMEN INTO MINISTRY

In a conversation across continents, Rev Amutha Devaraj, one of the few Asian women Baptist ministers, and Pastor Jyoti Ratna, Bangladesh's first woman Baptist minister share about the power of God's calling on their lives

Jyoti: I felt called to ministry from a young age but I could not understand how I would start and who would help me. I was privileged to be brought up in a Christian family, which is not usual in Bangladesh. I received a strong Christian grounding from my parents: every

day we need to pray together, we need to go to church, we need to go to do service through the church. It helped me to come to know God and it fueled my desire to work for God's kingdom and helped me understand God's calling on my life.

Amutha: I was originally from a Hindu background and my parents were Hindu. We were worshipping so many gods and we were living not highly orthodox but carefree. We celebrate all holidays in the calendar, like Christmas and also all the Hindu festivals. We were fine with that. But in my childhood, I had a few encounters with Christian friends going to church nearby, but nothing pierced my heart. I was always thinking, ‘Oh these Christians, they always grab me, and they put me in a church, and they want me to know about Jesus. They have come again; can we lock the door?’

At university I met Doni, who is now my husband. He had seen me in one of the churches my Christian friends had taken me to. The first question he asked was, “Are you a Christian?” He’s from a third generation Lutheran-background Christian family. I liked him so I said, “Yeah, I’m a Christian.” Before we got married, his family gave me a sprinkle baptism. They asked me the traditional questions. I said, “I do, I will,” but I did not feel a real conversion in my heart.

Jyoti: I moved to Dhaka after graduation to stay in a girls’ hostel. Every evening, I went to the hostel roof and prayed to God for guidance. My friend had joined an NGO and said I should join too. I prayed about that and got a real sense that God wanted to use me for his Kingdom, so I said no. I waited and prayed for two weeks and then the Bible Student Fellowship of Bangladesh (BSFB) called and offered me to minister with them. And so, my service of God began with them working in youth ministry.

Amutha: After we completed our PhDs in material science back home in Chennai, we moved to Japan for research-related work. We lived there for about nine years and

“ I said to God, ‘Give me a better job with better money, then I will leave the job and follow you. I was making business deals with the Lord ”

during those years I was so reluctant to go to church on Sundays. But Doni is a quiet, silent evangelist. He never forced me but he was reading the Bible all the time. I watched him but with not much conviction. I was always asking, ‘Why we are wasting precious Sunday morning in the church rather than going with the friends outside?’

And then the time came, God’s time. We moved to the UK, first to Sheffield, where I felt disconnected from our church. A year later we moved to London for our academic careers at Imperial College. During that time, we started coming to the church where I am now and the church was so lovely, people were embracing us with the fullness of love. It was different to me. I started searching for who this God is because I felt some vacuum in my heart: a good family, good children, good career, everything is content, but there was a vacuum in my heart, what is it? I was searching for that. I started reading the Bible and God started speaking to me through the Bible and then at one point I was strongly convinced who Jesus is and who I am.

Jyoti: I wanted to study theology, to prepare



me deeper for what I felt was my God-calling. After completing my Masters at the College of Christian Theology Bangladesh (CCTB), I was offered the chance to remain on the faculty, but I had a commitment to BSFB and as a follower of Jesus, I cannot break my commitment. I didn't force the issue, but CCTB kept calling, kept calling. So, I told my boss and she said, 'Go to the interview, if they accept you, you must go.' So began my teaching ministry and since 2022, with support from BMS World Mission, I have been in the Philippines studying for my Master of Divinity. Just before moving here with my family, in November 2022, I was the first woman to be ordained as a Baptist minister in Bangladesh.

Amutha: I thought about all the time spent not knowing, those missed opportunities but also knew that God had brought me here at

the right time. I accepted Christ as my saviour and I told our senior minister that I want to be baptised because whatever happened before, I didn't call it a baptism, there was no real conversion. Like Jyoti, and so many women down the years, I started with Sunday school ministry, then youth ministry. Continuously I was growing by learning theology. I was still working at Imperial, but God started talking to me with the words from Matthew, 'Follow me, follow me, follow me.' I was thinking, 'I'm following you already, God. I don't know what else you are asking me. And then I was made redundant, and I had six-month period when I got to know God in close proximity, reading God's word all the time, praying deeply.

God was saying clearly, 'Come follow me.' And he was talking about, 'Peter, leave the net, leave everything and follow me.' And I said, 'Oh, leave the net. It is like leaving the

career that I have and following him.’ Okay Lord, I can follow you, but one thing: if I follow during my redundancy period, people will think I am choosing ministry because I have no job. So, I said to God, ‘Give me a job, a better job with better money, then I will leave the job and follow you. I was making business deals with the Lord; I hope Jesus enjoyed that. And he gave me the job, he gave me a good salary. And with human flesh, I forgot about the vow I made, I completely forgot. I settled in my job and one fine morning he reminded me again about ‘Follow me’ after a year in the new job.

I knew I must keep my vow for what Christ has done for me. But what would my ministry be? Then God started opening one door after another door, like people coming and asking, ‘Do you want to explore church ministry?’ Oh okay, this door is opening and I’d explore that. And then the senior minister in the church said he wasn’t surprised; he was expecting that. Confirmation from different places was coming. I came to my husband saying, ‘Can I leave the job? Can I leave the net? I believe this is what God is calling me to.’ He was really thrilled about my growth from minus to zero to whatever. And he said, ‘Okay, I will support you.’

It was a very difficult time financially, one person’s salary, supporting me at Spurgeon’s College for three years. But God provided. And then the church where I was growing up, where I was reborn, they accepted me as their minister in training for three years. And then after that they asked me to continue as their accredited minister and I am there with them still.

Jyoti: Oh, the salary. When I first started in ministry, it was so little. Many people said to me, ‘You can’t live on this, you must go work someplace else.’ I was in Dhaka, the capital

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city, and my money did not go far. But always when I prayed to God, I would hear him tell me that he is equipping me, he is keeping me, equipping me for a life in ministry. And in the year the Baptists in Bangladesh celebrate 225 years of history, they ordain their first woman, me. It is a long, long time.

Amutha: Our stories have many similarities and many differences. It must be overwhelming to be Bangladesh’s first woman Baptist minister but what an example you will be setting, what a pathway you are laying.

Jyoti: Unlike men, it is not easy for women in Bangladesh who feel called to ministry. We struggle for scholarships if we want to study theology. We struggle because there is no path for a church to know how to use or respond to a woman’s calling: ‘How will we use her? Who will use her?’ The churches’ first concern is always for the men, not the women. It’s such a challenge but God has been helping me.

Amutha: I was blessed that my husband



supported me, then the senior minister and the leadership team and men in the congregation. But there was one family who couldn't see beyond 1 Timothy 2. They could accept a woman in leadership but not in the pulpit. They left the church when I began my ministry. That hurt but it also helped me fully form my own views on women in ministry. It forced me to go deep to explore the call God had placed on my life.

It wasn't easy as the church began in 1929 and has only ever had English men in charge. It must have been a big shock for the congregation, but God has shown them how they can embrace me. It is really all God's planning: I'm from a foreign land; English is my second language' I am a scientist with no theological background; and yet I was baptised before their eyes, they watched me grow. I have found it such a challenge, but God has given me the strength to cope.

Jyoti: God gives us strength; he helps us overcome when we determine that our calling is from him. There is so much to overcome. So much noise from the outside: who will care for the family? Who will provide our needs in the Philippines? God is providing our needs, God provided, there was not a single day we were without food.

“ It is a struggle, it is a challenge but when we witness lives changed through our ministry, it brings such peace and joy, it is so much from God ”

Amutha: Finance is such a big struggle for women coming into ministry. At my church there was no budget to provide a stipend for a minister-in-training. At the next church meeting they had to decide what they were going to do with me. Just two days before the meeting, an elderly lady in the church died and she had left a legacy to the church. When they made their calculations, it was exactly three years salary for a minister-in-training.

Jyoti: It is a struggle, it is a challenge but when we witness lives changed through our ministry, it brings such peace and joy, it is so much from God.



Uganda's unsung heroes yearn to sing a new song

On a return visit to her homeland, Annet-Ttendo Miller hears the stories of women – and men – crying out for gender justice in churches across the country

‘Why not women?’ That is how the conversation I started off with two male workers from Justice Livelihood and Health (JLH), BMS World Mission’s partner in Uganda, during my recent visit. “I’m a Baptist and I’m

an Evangelical/ Pentecostal Pastor. The Bible says, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. (1 Timothy 2: 12 (NIV)”. According to the Baptist Union of Uganda’s doctrine, leadership is for men and women are not



allowed to preach. This was a hard-hitting revelation of what is at stake for women, men, the Body of Christ, God's Kingdom, and the unreached.

Both men I was in conversation with that day think the Bible agrees with the patriarchal culture and reinforces its expectations. By the end of our conversation, both asked a pertinent question, 'Why not women?'

They said that this position of not allowing women to preach or be ordained as ministers is flawed. Is it not surprising that in Uganda seven out of ten church goers are women and women's contribution towards the church is significant in terms of offerings and tithes and service? Women are gifted and have great potential and yet, women's roles have been considered inferior or as subordinate

servants and therefore they only qualify to serve as ushers, deacons, choir members, Sunday school teachers, intercessors or administrators. But not real worshippers in their own right, not as a Pastor or Preacher, not leading from the front.

Both men agree that 1 Timothy and its confusing verse is being used to prevent Christians from addressing gender inequalities within the church. This brings into the light the Ugandan church's crucial debate around maleness being a requirement for ministry. They discovered that such requirements for leadership were inappropriate and inadequate. The question remains, though, 'Did Jesus allow women to minister? Yes.' And so, these men are looking over the church's shoulder, longing to see change in the church leadership. But they





doubted if the Ugandan church was ready to engage in such a sensitive debate.

There is a danger when we approach well-known, beloved passages of scripture and read them out of context. How we read the Bible, and the assumptions that we bring before we start reading the text have an impact on our interpretation and understanding.

This conversation led to my reflection on the growing awareness of the contribution of African women in ministry. I call them the Church's 'unsung heroes', who care for orphans, and their families, they are brave and resilient in the face of adversity. And yet, their sacrifices and roles have not adequately been acknowledged in public ministry. They sing in the choirs, yet their songs remain unheard—they are Sunday School teachers, some are leaders of home groups, their

deeds are noble, and their stories give us the experience we need in exploring this volatile subject.

What does ministry look like in real life? Is it limited to the Reverend in her robes and collar, a Theological Seminary teacher? A missionary from a foreign distant land? What about lay person disciples? Who qualifies for ministry? Does personal obedience to the Word of God and calling into ministry have any significance?

Here is my discovery: an alcoholic meets Jesus in her dream and becomes a follower of Jesus. Abigail was an alcoholic; she used to spend all her money on drink. This woman was well acquainted with being an outcast, despised, and shunned by society. She had no voice in her community. She was seen as irresponsible. Could we look at her life in a new way, take off our cultural blinders

that keep us from seeing what God can do in restoring lives? Jesus wants us to see people in a new way. That includes seeing women in a new way. Women are to be included; they are part of the harvest Jesus had come to reap.

Abigail had a dream; she saw herself in a coffin covered with maggots. Jesus said to her, 'Follow me, I have given you a second chance, go and tell others.' She woke up from her dream and she was instantly delivered from alcoholism. Today, she is a mother of four biological children and one foster child. Today, she is home group leader in Kasangati village and sings in the choir. She now has a place of belonging and acceptance in her community. In this new women's group, she has learned a lot about how to take care of herself and her home.

Abigail confidently affirmed to me that, "The Lord took my shame, and gave me a place in my society. I am now a responsible woman, cultivating people's gardens, making bricks, cleaning and washing and I can send my children to school." She also narrates how she became friends with one woman she met at a bar, she died recently during childbirth and left a baby with an unknown father. Abigail decided to foster the newborn baby girl, who is now three months old. She is happy that she is taking care of this baby as her own child. She says, "You don't have to be rich to help those in need, all you need is an open heart." A true hero isn't measured by the size of her strength but by the size of her heart.

Abigail, just like many women all over the world, have found freedom in Jesus but are still bound by ideas that pressure a woman to let culture, not God, determine her place in the Kingdom. While hurting men and men in the church cry out, 'Is there any hope?', their brothers and sisters in the church are asking, 'How can I share the hope I have?'

"A true hero isn't measured by the size of her strength but by the size of her heart."

How can I, a woman, serve the Lord?" Women like Abigail, having heard God call them into roles in the Kingdom, are serving in various positions, hoping that the church will support them and value them.

There's another story of a 28-year-old stay-at-home mother who converted from Islam to Christianity. It happened this way: she became a believer after attending a women's conference. She had her first child at the age of 15 and Dorothy Kayanja supported her to go back to school. She was able to complete her secondary education. She dreamt of becoming a nursery schoolteacher. After she became a believer she experienced a change of heart and forgiveness of her mother, who she blamed for her misfortunes. She is now a Sunday school teacher and uses local materials to teach the Bible to the children in her community. She reads the Bible to the children, she tells them stories. Without support from other women, she would not have become the woman she is today.

My hope with these words I bring to you from Uganda, is to give these heroes some power to sing in their might.



SHELF AWARENESS

The books that formed us

DR VALERIE DUVAL-POUJOL TAKES US THROUGH THE KEYHOLE OF HER STUDY TO PEAK AT THE WORKS THAT SHAPED HER FAITH

As a Bible translator, of course, the Bible comes first. On my shelves I have: an old French copy belonging to my Huguenots ancestors, who were persecuted for their Protestant faith; Martin Luther's translation, the first in vernacular language that paved the way for everybody to be able to read the Bible in their own language; a French Bible, the "Nouvelle Français courant". I had the privilege of being chief editor for this Bible translation (similar to Good News), leading 60 specialists from many French-speaking countries, I learned so much from all of them in their different contexts; and the Septuagint, a modern edition of this third-century BC text - the very first biblical translation! I wrote my PhD

dissertation on the Septuagint and textual criticism (a study of the manuscripts of the Bible) and it was a life-changing reflection.

Then we have a book written by my dad, Jacques Poujol (Baptist minister and therapist), one of the 25 he has written. This one is on sexual abuses in churches. He was a pioneer in the fight against this plague. His worldview and spirituality have deeply influenced mine.

There is also a book from Pope Francis, the *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel). Throughout this exhortation Francis calls for more pastoral creativity and openness, insisting that the entire Church realise "a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything", and adds that "the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are."



I learned a lot from Catholic authors, our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Next is Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror*, a work that inspired me in feminist theology and feminist readings of the Bible. Trible examines four Old Testament narratives of suffering in ancient Israel: Hagar, Tamar, an unnamed concubine and the daughter of Jephthah. In her introduction, she defines the perspective (documenting the case against women), the methodology (literary criticism), and the narrative thrust (wrestling with God and demons in the terror of these texts) and warns: "The journey is solitary and intense. In joining this venture, the reader assumes risks."

Beside this risky work is one by the Nobel Peace Laureate, Pentecostal pastor and gynaecologist Denis Mukwege, *La force des*

femmes (The strength of women). Mukwege, known as "the man who repairs women", founded and works in Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, the Democratic Republic of Congo, where he specialises in the treatment of women who have been raped by armed rebels. His battle against impunity in war rape in his native land and his determined faith is so inspiring.

Next is a book by Jacques Ellul, one of the most influential French protestant thinkers, pointing at how Christianity has been subverted when it became powerful. And last but not least, Martin Luther King's *Strength to Love*. His image that a Christian should be a thermostat changing the world and not a thermometer merely taking the temperature has inspired me since my teenage years - and continues to do so.

'I believed I c

IN A BREAK WITH A TRADITION,
BEFORE SHE UNSETTLES THE WORD,
DEBORA RÖHL OPENS UP ABOUT HER
JOURNEY OF FAITH AND HOW IT HAS
SHAPED HER LIFE

I was born into a Christian family and ended up as the oldest of five kids. Faith was part of my life for as long as I can remember. I told my parents at six that I wanted to follow Jesus, and I remember that my main motivation for learning to read was to read the Bible. By eight, I was reading it every day by

myself, and that habit has lasted most of my life. I grew up immersed in a space where the Bible was very important, and I do not unsettle the word lightly.

It was also a space where women were not allowed to teach or have any kind of authority. Marriage was strictly hierarchical and the way the family and church functioned was very hierarchical. I'm also a missionary kid. When I was about 10 years old, my father moved all of us to Romania. Six years later, our parents sent me and my two younger sisters back to Germany to finish high school. I then moved to Ireland to study at Dublin City University, where I was part of the Christian Union (CU).

I was very committed and faithful, and I helped with all the practical things. But I was very reluctant to go to bigger national or regional gatherings, often because there would be women teaching at those conferences. In my second year, the Christian

ouldn't lead as a woman'

Union thought me to be the most natural next president, and they were totally taken aback when I told them I wouldn't, that I couldn't. I'm a woman and I believed I couldn't lead as a woman.

Spoiler alert: I did become president but not that year. I had to be taken out of my context again. I went on exchange to Mexico, and that's where everything started to shift. I was in a situation where nobody was going to lead the Bible study and they said, 'Well, if you don't do it, nobody's going to do it.' I was studying a text from the Gospels about the Pharisees at that time, and I had this revelation, 'That's me. I think this is this law, and I can't do this, but it's a barrier in my mind, I'm just like the Pharisees.' That's where it all started in the sense of seeing something different in scripture, because up until that point, scripture seemed very clear.

So, I went back to Dublin for my last year at university, and I did become the president. The CU had an anonymous vote, and everyone voted for me. It felt so obvious: this is God, I cannot deny it.

At the same time, I decided to write my thesis on 1 Timothy 2 and took a deep dive into different theological approaches to the role of women in church. After DCU, I



went back to Mexico to work as the logistics assistant for the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES) World Assembly, which is held every four years, and at that time was taking place in Mexico. I then spent two years with IFES in Israel and then returned to Mexico for the next six years.

Through my time with IFES, I was exposed to different views, and that really had a big impact. It didn't all shift in one moment, but I think it laid the groundwork for all the different shifts that I was going to go through in the following years.



UNSETTLING THE WORD

Exodus 1 (The Israelites Oppressed) and 2 (The Birth of Moses)

IN THE LATEST IN OUR SERIES OF EXPERIMENTS IN READING THE BIBLE THROUGH THE EYES OF ANOTHER, DEBORA RÖHL GIVES THE WOMEN OF EXODUS THE CHANCE TO STEP OUT FROM MOSES' SHADOW

When I was asked to choose a passage to reflect on, I wanted something that would feel authentic to my experience, that's why I chose Exodus 1 and 2. During my Master's course, I rediscovered these chapters through the lens of narrative theology, which is really embedded in the Latin American integral mission approach. I discovered so many riches I had never seen. I've heard this story so many times but looking at it through a different lens and with a different set of tools was really enriching. And studying it while doing community development work in Mexico really shaped my reading too.

In rediscovering the narrative of Exodus 1 and 2, I discovered just how subversive the whole story is. In the past, within my background and tradition, the main point presented was that our hero, Moses, is going to free the Israelites. Yet within these first two chapters lie so many other stories. The main characters and the real heroines of those stories are the midwives, his mum,

his sister, and then his future wife and her sisters, because these women all save him. So, without everything that's happening in Exodus 1 and 2, we would never get the Moses that gets to liberate the people of God.

These women practice civil disobedience on a grand scale. They do their own defiant thing, and they don't ask anyone for permission. Let's look at the midwives and how courageous they are. They audaciously defy the Pharaoh's decree. They could have been killed easily. I think most of us would not be willing to go against the command of the most powerful person in our world. One of my prayers coming out of this was, 'Lord, give me a faith like Shiphrah and Puah'. There is a courageous faith that subverts and opposes the empire; a faith that's fighting for life in a place where this very powerful ruler wants to inflict death on the most vulnerable.

And then there's Moses' sister, Miriam, and the risk this young girl takes when she approaches Pharaoh's daughter to ask if she needs a Hebrew woman to breastfeed the baby, and the audacity (that word again) and cunning required in that situation. And



Pharaoh's daughter in turn takes a risk, not on the same scale as the other women in the narrative but she is still going against the decree of her father.

Part of my course assignment was to give a narrative sermon on Exodus 1 and 2 and in preparation I was struck by the great irony that threads throughout the chapters. What great irony, the king who didn't think that girls were important, is tricked and disobeyed by his own daughter, who is tricked by a little girl to pay a Hebrew woman for the privilege of breastfeeding her own son, who should be dead." Such irony and such a sense of humour from God. The Pharaoh's attitude is, 'Oh, kill the boys. Oh, I don't care about the girls. They're not going to do anything,' but the girls are the ones who give birth. And in this story, it's the girls who go against his decrees.

You have the contrast between all these women doing all these successful subversive acts of civil disobedience and then you have this first attempt by Moses of solving the problem. He resorts to violence, and it doesn't work. Moses is not the hero of those two chapters. He fails. What he does in killing the Egyptian guy doesn't have the desired effect. These two chapters are so much focused on the women and they're ridiculing the powerful in so many ways.

These chapters give me a lot of hope, especially when reading them in a Mexican context that is hard on women. In many ways, being a woman in Mexico is dangerous. There are a lot of stories where girls have been abducted or killed or raped when they get into a taxi and they never reappear. There were several of those cases that

shook Mexican society while I was there. The danger feels very real. I imagine being a Hebrew woman in Egypt, meant living in a similar tinderbox of fear. You are living in an oppressive society, freedom is really restricted, your safety feels entirely wrapped up in your meekness. When I was growing up the women of Exodus were mentioned but only ever as sidenotes. Moses was the hero, and they were the prelude. The reasonable interpretation was that this is about Christians trying to live in a world out to harm us. We must take care of ourselves, God is on our side, and he will prosper us against odds. Essentially a reading that places white Christians into a place of victimhood.

Re-appraising Exodus helped me to see and appreciate the acts of subversion and resistance being carried out by the women in the community where I lived. It's a very well-known community in Mexico City called Tepito. It's a very dangerous neighbourhood and the absence of fathers is very common. It is the mother and grandmothers who are often the real heroes. They are the ones who really take care, and educate, and nurture, and make sure that the children and grandchildren study, maybe even go to university, and build better lives for themselves.

The neighbourhood is renowned for its defiant women. Long before I made my home in Tepito, a Catalan artist called Mireia Sallarès spent time there and created a modest stone pedestal in the heart of the neighbourhood. She built it as a tribute to the stories of seven women from Tepito who narrated their lives for her documentary

Las 7 Cabronas de Tepito ('*The Seven Invisible Bitches of Tepito*'). Well, that pedestal was in my backyard and the beautiful thing about it is that there is no statue, any and every woman can take her place up there and

acknowledge her defiance in the face of the powerful. There are lots of women in Tepito, some of whom I know personally now, who are defying the system by their disobedience, by being strong, by protecting their family, by protecting themselves against patriarchal violence. They are the backbone of this marginalised neighbourhood, and they have made it a place of resistance.

My life in Tepito came to be through a movement called Move In, which encourages Christians to have a ministry of presence based on two requisites: you live there, and you pray. My life in Tepito transformed how I read Exodus, and it is no wonder that the seeming powerlessness

and vulnerability of the women in Exodus spoke to me in a new way. If you have no proximity to people living life on the margins you cannot empathise with people in those kinds of situations. And if you have no proximity to people on the margins, there's a lot that you're going to miss out on in the Bible. I have some limited experience of marginalisation because of being a white woman growing up in a patriarchal world. But that doesn't compare to a woman of colour who's growing up in a patriarchal world and is also in poverty. But I think the marginalisation I have experienced as a woman has made me more sensitive and empathetic to the vulnerability that people on the margins experience. That's my bridge.



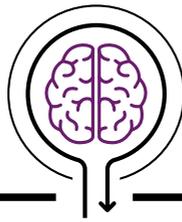
“these women practice civil disobedience on a grand scale. They do their own defiant thing, and they don’t ask anyone for permission.”

That narrative sermon I mentioned earlier, consisted in part of telling the story of Exodus 1 and 2 from young Miriam’s point of view. I finished it like this: “Isn’t it impressive to look at the story from this perspective? Can you see God’s great sense of humour? In this story, we see a powerful man who does everything in his power to destroy the people of Israel and with them, the work and the promises of God, and even the coming of the Messiah. But nobody can obstruct God’s plan. His strategy in history hasn’t been to defy rulers with power or with strength. Many times, God chooses to use the powerless and unlikely. In this case, women who were not valued and were underestimated.

Pharaoh didn’t care about the girls, but God did. Pharaoh didn’t think that they were going to be able to change history, but God did. Shiphrah and Puah didn’t comply with the cruel command of Pharaoh and saved many children. Jochebed defies the orders of Pharaoh by hiding her son for three months.



Miriam with her subversive intervention makes it possible for Moses to grow up partly in a Hebrew family, something that without any doubt, was important for him to appreciate his origins. God chose Shiphrah, Puah, Jochebed, Miriam, even Pharaoh’s daughter, to change the history of his people at that very dark moment. They didn’t know in that moment, but they did the right thing before God despite the very dangerous consequences their actions could have had for them personally. They fought for life with what they had at hand. God is always working to bring about his kingdom and to fulfil his promises. May God give us the courage, the astuteness and the faith of Shiphrah, Puah, Jochebed, and Miriam to defend all life and to build his Kingdom.



A TIME I CHANGED MY MIND

‘YOU CANNOT DENY WHAT GOD IS DOING’

*IN OUR AGE OF ENTRENCHED OPINIONS MASQUERADING AS TRUTHS,
THIS FEATURE CHERISHES THE HUMILITY REQUIRED TO CHANGE ONE’S
MIND. IN THIS ISSUE, REV SIMON WOODMAN RECOUNTS HIS JOURNEY TO
ACCEPTING AND CHAMPIONING WOMEN IN MINISTRY*

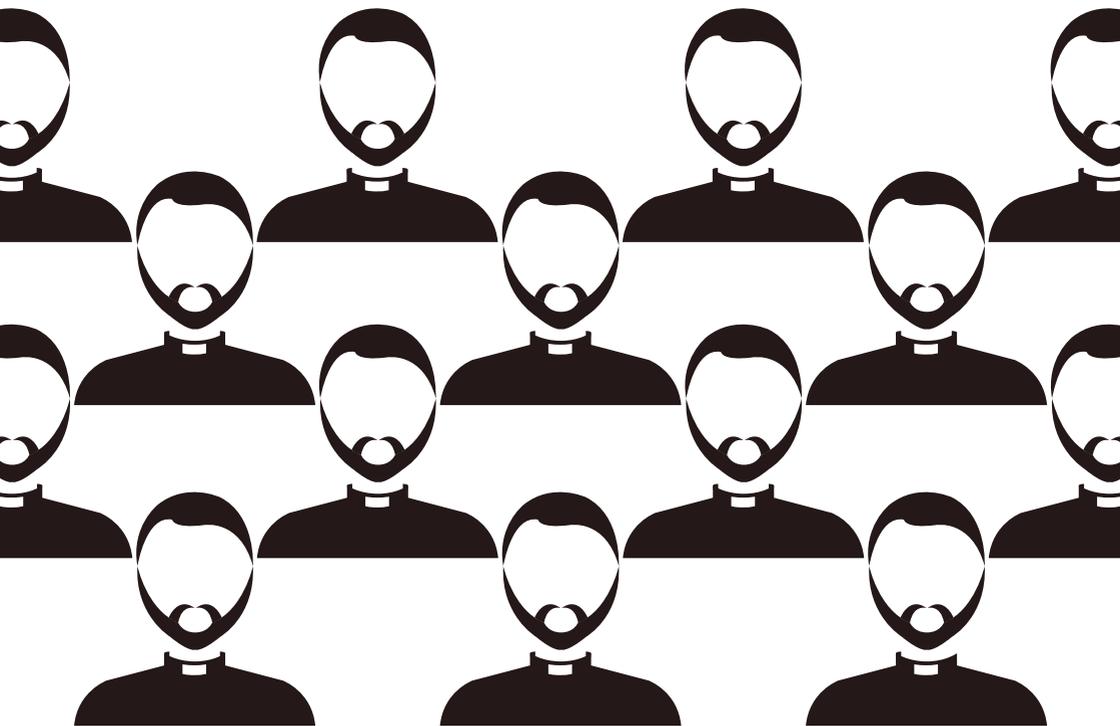
One of the observations my wife sometimes sends my way is a frustrated comment that I always think I’m right. To which I reply, well of course I do, because if I thought I was wrong I’d have changed my mind by now. After all, who goes round thinking things that they don’t actually believe any more? But then I have another friend who tells me that she spends most of her life believing, deep down, that she is probably wrong about most things.

I tell this story because I think the way our society is structured makes it easier for men to think they’re right, and for women to think they’re wrong. There’s a name for this, it’s called the ‘patriarchy’, and it’s the millennia-old system that has shaped our world, in

which men are privileged in terms of power, leadership, and social privilege. It comes to us from the ancient Roman and Greek cultures, where men were seen as the head of the household, and were favoured in decision-making roles, while women were confined to domestic or subordinate positions in the household and in society. It is also the way of viewing men and women that was around at the time of the writing of the New Testament, and even today it often makes it hard for men to admit that they are wrong, or to change their minds.

So, here’s a story of when I changed my mind about women in ministry.

I’ve been attending a Baptist Church since before I was born, and throughout my childhood the role models for ministry that I



encountered were all men. As someone who sensed a very early call to ministry myself, the examples these godly men set for me were an inspiration and encouragement; I could see something of myself in them. We did sometimes have women preaching: the occasional missionary on furlough, for example. But these were the exception rather than the rule.

In our youth group, I remember being told that while it was okay before God for a woman to preach, there had to be a man in overall charge, because that was what was written in the Bible.

As I progressed through my teens, I became more and more fascinated by the Bible; I had one of the old NIV Study Bibles and I pored over the notes and the maps. I was fortunate enough to be able to do an A-level in Religious Studies that focused on the Bible, and this paved the way for me to head off to university in Sheffield to do a degree in Biblical Studies.

What I found, as so many do, is that the more you study the Bible, the more you realise it's a complex document through which God has chosen to reveal Jesus to us. And so, I started to discover that quite a few things my youth leader had told me the Bible said might not actually be sustained in the light of a close reading of the Bible itself.

While at University I met Liz, who has been my wife now for 30 years! As she told me about her experience of church, growing up in the Brethren, I started to realise how damaging Christianity can be to women. She was brought up to believe that women must remain silent in church, that they must have their heads covered as a sign of their submission to their husbands, and that they could never be preachers or leaders, all because the Bible says so.

But I still hadn't experienced any women ministers myself, and I hadn't properly changed my mind from what I'd been told as a child.



Then, a few years later, I went to Bristol Baptist College to train for ministry and found myself in class alongside women who were also training. Fairly early on I remember a conversation with one of them, who is still one of my best friends. I said that I wasn't sure whether women could be ministers because of what the Bible says, and she just replied, 'Oh Simon, don't be so ridiculous. You've met me now, you can't deny what God's doing!'. And I realised she was right. Like Peter on the rooftop of Cornelius' house, I realised that I had been calling unacceptable what God had already declared acceptable (Acts 10: 15).

That was the day my journey properly began. I had to go back and re-read the scriptures again, more carefully and with better guides. I came to realise that the passages which I had been told restricted the ministry of women, could actually be understood as revealing a Jesus-inspired path out from the restrictive culture of the first

century (with the patriarchy in full swing), to a place where women were educated, emancipated, and enabled to be fully equal to men in both the home, church, and society. I also slowly came to realise that part of my ministry was going to be using my power as a man, and a straight white man at that, to amplify the voices of those who are often not listened to in our churches. And it began, for me, with the change in my convictions about women in ministry.

I'm a biblical scholar by discipline, and also a bit of a historian, and so I've written a few things over the years to try and help others understand not only how they might read the Bible in ways that affirm the ministry of women, but also to understand our shared history as a Baptist family of both affirming and denying the role of women in our midst.

This story was first told as part of the Project Violet Podcast, Episode 1: The story so far (see back page for more details).

‘EVERY PIECE OF BMS WORK WILL REFLECT OUR COMMITMENT TO GENDER JUSTICE’

So begins the BMS World Mission Gender Charter, the necessary earthing point as this issue was birthed. What follows is an extract from this vital document...

Preface

The pinnacle of God's creation was the creation of human beings ‘in our image...male and female he created them’ - and their shared existence was given expression in a world teeming with life, offering them everything they needed to thrive in relationship with the Creator, with themselves and with the creation around them. It wasn't just good. It was very good.

What we call ‘the fall’ is a comprehensive fracturing of these interwoven relationships, such that the mission of God in which the Church participates embraces the belief that humankind needs to be reconciled to God and to one another and needs to understand afresh what it means to live in harmony with God's creation.

BMS' vision states that, ‘the highest goal of all we do is to bring people to faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and an experience of the abundant life that only he can provide.’ This abundant life includes the experience of men and women living in ways where this fracturing is overcome, where justice between genders characterises our relationships, where gender equality and gender equity are given expression...

...Everywhere we work, we see that gender injustice is a blight on the lives of countless millions of people, especially women. It is impossible to be about the mission of God in the world and fail to see the daily impact of gender injustice.

Core convictions

As we have reflected on this theologically, we have arrived at a number of core convictions:

- One, that all human beings are made in the image of God, made male and female, and made for the mutual flourishing of one another.
- Two, that the Bible describes the creation of and harmony between the sexes as the pinnacle of God's good creation, and that gender injustice is therefore one of the fundamental characteristics of the fallenness of humanity.
- Three, that Jesus Christ is the one perfect example of a countercultural life lived in a patriarchal society.
- Four, that the lived reality of patriarchy in many parts of the world limits, stifles, threatens, and ultimately damages the lives of women.
- And five, that one expression of the Kingdom of God being made real in the lives of people will be a redemption of gender relationships.

IN ASSOCIATION WITH YESHUA'S RADICAL FEMINISM



NATALIA-NANA LESTER-BUSH

Despite being a strong believer in gender equality and believing God creatively and generously pours out their gifts and callings into anyone open to them, I don't want to use my column to reflect on the role of women in church and Christianity. Shocking as it is that I'd pass that opportunity up, what's on my mind as I've finished reading this issue are questions about who we listen to and whose voices we silence or ignore.

Whenever I open the draft layout for the magazine, I immediately scan the pictures to see who's sharing. Opening the document this time, looking at the photos I noticed how many women were contributing. I wonder if you noticed too. I wonder if you may have thought it makes sense because they're talking about women and church. And I wonder if it'd be odd or okay, great or uncomfortable if an issue had mostly female contributors on a topic like Church history, or theologies of incarnation?

It makes sense that we are used to mostly listening to men. Usually White ones. And a few White women. Who have academic qualifications in theology or Bible-related topics. The historic journey of Christianity and

global power - economic, religious, political, legal and more - has been directed and held by (mostly White) men. So, I find it ironic that, apart from his maleness, Jesus had none of these characteristics. He had no formal academic qualifications, and it's debated and unclear whether he had formal Rabbinical (i.e. theological) training. We know that he had extensive knowledge and confidence in interpreting and debating Torah, Prophets and other Jewish scriptures. And of course, he had male privilege and power in a highly patriarchal society where women's testimony was not even valid in courts of law. Reading the gospels I learn so much from seeing how Yeshua used his social advantages - his 'privileges' - to champion, connect with and include those at the margins, who are so often women. Women being punished for an accusation of adultery. Women keen to live beyond the domestic role of their gender and to learn as a disciple. Women of the wrong faith, wrong race and wrong relationship history. Women being shamed and shunned for surviving by selling their bodies to men who greedily bought them like meat.

The way Jesus treats women so radically respectfully and equally makes me marvel at

the make-up of our church leaderships. And it makes me sad that unlike Jesus, those of us deemed worthy of having the mic so often use it to raise our own voices instead of using it to amplify the voices of those un-listened to. I love that we now are more ready to recognise and celebrate that God calls people of any gender to ministry; the next question for me is which women are we including now. I picture Yeshua's Messiah-hood being proclaimed by a woman in Samaria debating theology with a Jewish Rabbi at a well, becoming the first Evangelist. And then picture His resurrection being proclaimed by the first Apostle, a woman from Magdala freed from demons who followed and supported Jesus through death and new life. And in that new Way, that new life of following the Resurrected Messiah is Lydia. Pictured on the front cover of this issue, she was most likely the leader of the first congregation at Philippi. Inspired by Yeshua's radical feminism, courageous women like Lydia were at the centre of the radical early Jesus-followers movement.

It got me thinking about the kind of women deemed worthy of being listened to in Christianity. It's hard enough to be treated with respect and equality when in a female body which has white skin and a middle-class lifestyle. Yet those aren't the women Jesus most connected with or promoted. Who are the women we listen to and learn from, and who do we deem in need? I'm inspired and prompted seeing that, for Jesus, they're one and the same.

Regular readers may remember me previously writing about my Anglican Reverend Grandad. I remember when the Church of England was discussing ordaining women in the mid-1990s, and my 80-year-old Grandad said that being a vicar was too challenging for women because they're emotional. As much as I disagreed with his reasoning (calmly, lest I show too much

“ Yeshua used his patriarchal privileges to champion, connect with and include those at the margins, who are so often women ”

emotion of course), I appreciate that he was honest and open in forming theological views from his own perceptions and cultural views. Just as we all inevitably do. Years later, I remember us chatting about God and life and Gramps saying that he'd seen many good female vicars and believed that God could choose and use anyone and it wasn't an issue of gender. We can all be open to changing our mind if our hearts are open and I wonder about the ways we could be surprised if we allowed ourselves to change our own minds.

I appreciate Rev Simon Woodman's reflections on changing their mind. Considering not just set texts on gender but reflecting on the cultures we and Jesus' early followers lived in, the evidence of our life experiences and of course Bible stories and teachings. It's wishful naivety to think one can form a theology purely from Biblical texts, as if the act of reading isn't informed by the ways we see the world and process information. Instead of striving to be an empty vessel into which Holy Spirit pours wisdom and discernment, I think God delights in using our own thoughts, life experiences and cultural context to help us form our spiritual views and beliefs. And just as God models changing so generously through incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension, we can allow ourselves to be changed and to celebrate those changes too.

A CONSTANT WRESTLE

If the voices in this issue have lit a flame within you and you wish to journey on a violet-hued path towards gender justice, I hope the resources below can be your compass and your guide.

READ

THE POWER OF WOMEN

Subtitled 'A doctor's journey of hope and healing', this is one of the works on the shelf of Dr Valerie Duval-Poujol. Written by Nobel laureate and human rights activist, Dr Mukwege, it is a rallying cry to rid our societies of violence against women.

IF ADAM PICKED THE APPLE

This poem by Danielle Coffyn, 2023 winner of the prestigious Pushcart Prize, finishes with the line: And a woman's desire / for freedom is rarely a cause / for celebration. Her work is a constant wrestle with gender injustice.

WATCH

LAS 7 CABRONAS E INVISIBLES DE TEPITO

For those inspired by Debora R's Unsettling the Word and how she earthed it in Tepito, here's the documentary made by Catalan artist Mireia Sallarès about seven tough Mexican 'bitches' who shape the neighbourhood.

bmswm.org/toughtepito



LISTEN

PROJECT VIOLET: THE STORY SO FAR

Rev Jane Day and Dr Helen Cameron sit down for revealing conversations with some of the Project Violet researchers and contributors, including A Time I Changed My Mind author Simon Woodman.

bmswm.org/projectviolet

PHOEBE: A STORY

There is something special about work read by the author. The audiobook of this novel is read by New Testament scholar Paula Gooder as she tells the remarkable story of the deacon of the church at Cenchreae, who was entrusted to deliver Paul's letter to the Romans.

GOING DEEPER WITH BMS:

Annet Ttendo-Miller

As part of series getting under the skin of his colleagues, editor Matty Fearon sat down with contributor and Gender Justice Co-ordinator Ttendo to delve into the motivations behind her crusading work.

bmswm.org/fuelcast

Mission Catalyst



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Editor: Matty Fearon. Design: Malky Currie. General Director: Kang-San Tan
BMS World Mission, PO Box 49, 129 Broadway, Didcot, Oxfordshire, OX11 8XA.
Email us with comments about *Mission Catalyst* to: catalyst@bmsworldmission.org