The Gift of Methodist Women

The Rev Dr Gabrielle Thomas tells us what her research has revealed about women’s experiences in Methodism

‘Methodism is a safe place for women to be women.’ I was struck by this comment made by a woman, who has served as a Circuit Superintendent Minister during the past decade. It was slipped into a rich conversation, in which she reflected upon some of her experiences of being a woman who works in the Methodist Church. Whilst I was listening to her, it seemed to me that what she had said revealed something important - both with respect to the culture within Methodism, and also about the broader ecumenical context. If it’s safe to be a woman within Methodism, does this imply there are places where it is not safe?

She is one of a number of Methodist women who has contributed to a research project, which uses receptive ecumenism to explore women’s experiences of working within diverse churches in England. Whilst the research shines a light on the complexity and range of women’s experiences of serving in lay and ordained roles, it also shows that the Methodist Church has particular gifts, concerning women in ministry, to share with its ecumenical partners.

The Research Context

Throughout 2018, 122 women have participated in this research, either through focus groups or interviews. The Methodist women who participated perform roles such as Deacon, Presbyter, Local Preacher, Worship Leader, Chaplain, Circuit Superintendent, Theological Educator, and Youth Worker; all are paid for their work, with some receiving stipends. The 5 focus groups which gathered in various locations across England have each comprised 8-18 women, who range from 21 to 91 years of age. The traditions involved include Methodist, Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, Orthodox, United Reformed, Assemblies of God, Independent Evangelical and Independent Pentecostal.

Initially, women were invited from preexisting networks, and then invitations were rolled out more widely. Women from other traditions were invited but for various reasons were not able to participate. In light of the limits both with respect to numbers and traditions, this research does not claim to speak for every woman in every church, rather to bring to the fore the voices and experiences of those women who attended focus groups or were interviewed. Interestingly, every Methodist woman invited responded with a firm ‘yes’ when I contacted them, with only one exception. I asked them why they were positive about this project, and they answered, ‘we are
ecumenically minded’, ‘we know we have things to say’, and ‘we are a ‘let’s get on with it’ kind of denomination’.

**Research Aims**

The women have been exploring questions, such as: what kinds of gifts do we find in our traditions, which relate to our experiences as women working in churches? What are the challenges women face when working in churches? What can women from diverse traditions learn from one another?

The research was designed to employ some of the core principles of receptive ecumenism, at the heart of which lies the belief that each faith tradition has an ecumenical responsibility to ask, ‘What do we need to learn from the other to help us address difficulties in our own tradition?’

**Receptive Ecumenism**

One way of understanding receptive ecumenism is like this:

In England, ‘High Tea’ is a tradition in which the host or hostess brings out all their best china and puts it on the table for the guests, covered with delicious food. On these occasions, the convention is to use only the very best china and crockery, preferably a matching set. If you have any broken or chipped plates, the practice is to keep them hidden at the back of a cupboard, well out of the sight of your guests.

Sometimes, when churches come together ecumenically, it can be a little like an English ‘High Tea’, in which the churches share only the best of themselves. We are often quite good at coming to the ‘tea party’, with our bright and shiny plates, ready to share our gifts with other churches, and to explain to them how we ‘do church properly’. If there are any aspects of church life which are not fully functioning we tend to keep these hidden, firmly out of sight; just like those old, chipped plates in the back of the cupboard.

Receptive ecumenism turns this behaviour upside down by encouraging faith traditions not to bring out their best china at an ecumenical gathering. Instead, one tradition is invited to lay out their broken and chipped crockery for the other tradition to see. With their brokenness in sight, one asks the other whether they have any gifts which would help heal the brokenness. In this instance, brokenness refers to those aspects of our traditions where destructive practices, or dysfunctions, are at work. To engage in receptive ecumenism is to encourage traditions to pause, and to be honest with themselves. It creates the space for us to admit that not everything within our churches functions perfectly yet; rather there are wounds and difficulties in each of our traditions that await the Spirit’s transformation. Ultimately, it is guided by the belief that the Holy Spirit is calling the churches into full and visible unity.
In light of this, the women were encouraged to listen to, learn from and receive from one another, not only sharing positive experiences but also some of the difficulties of working within their respective traditions. The women shared openly and vulnerably with one another – despite having a recording device placed in their midst. When I asked why they were able to share such personal details with ease, even though they did not previously know one another, one woman replied, ‘there is something special about receptive ecumenism which means you are not forced into a fake kind of positivity where you need to just say everything is brilliant. What we’ve been doing in these groups has genuinely freed me up to think long and hard about being Methodist, and everyone has been doing the same with their own church’.

‘Women have different experiences and different interpretations of themselves in their roles in churches’

It became clear through the research that women’s experiences and their understanding of their own gifts and skills is a complex issue. We cannot simply say ‘all women experience this’, or ‘all women experience that’ - women’s experiences are diverse, and how they understand themselves ‘on the job’ differs from woman to woman. Some of the women participating in the focus groups thought that ‘women bring something different from men’, stating that they thought they were generally more ‘pastoral and caring’, whereas other women disagreed with this. As one put it, ‘I know many men who are naturally far more pastorally gifted than I am – I’d much rather work on strategy’. For all the women participating, this highlighted the need to genuinely listen to one another, rather than to assume each women is like the other.

Gifts of Methodism

Many positive aspects of Methodism were discussed through the course of the research. Following the core values of receptive ecumenism, I will focus here on the gifts which the women from other traditions most often identified as those which would be helpful to their own church. These were the Methodist sense of ‘connectedness’, the ‘non-hierarchical structure’, and the ‘Methodist Quadrilateral’.

Connectedness

‘Connectedness’ arose, as a value core to Methodism, in every interview and focus group, as one woman said, ‘For Methodists, being connected is really important to us. So, it’s the sense, which may not always be strongly felt by everybody, of all being connected right across Britain and therefore of seeking to share resources. We don’t do it very well all the time, but we are at least seeking to do that’.

The women listening to this, and to comments like it, agreed univocally that this is a value from which their churches would benefit. Responding, an Anglican said, ‘listening
to this has made me think that, whilst there are various networks in the Church of England which serve this kind of purpose, it’s not at the heart of our DNA, since we tend to function more within our separate dioceses - I think we could really do with reflecting on this further’. And a Catholic said, ‘women are good at connecting in the Catholic Church, at least with one another, but I don’t see it so much across the dioceses where the hierarchy is concerned- this would be such a blessing’.

The women went onto to explore precisely how being connected helps with collaboration- they identified that leaders are more likely to collaborate if they are connected. This was often discussed in relation to the specific kind of non-hierarchical leadership structure in place in the Methodist Church.

‘Non-hierarchical structure’

Every single Methodist mentioned the ‘non-hierarchical structure’. They each referred to it positively and with reference to the way this contributes to the flourishing of women in all kinds of ministries. One presbyter observed,

‘Methodism has an understanding of institutional non-hierarchical core leadership, which does not reinforce male dominance/alpha male models of leadership. My experience as a leader has been a positive one in the main and I put this down to our leadership structure.’ Another woman went on to link this to income, ‘In Methodism we have parity of stipend. Every minister paid the same on the grounds that you cannot assess the value of ministry, for example, the probationer who left college yesterday might be more effective than the President of Conference, so there is no graduation and accordingly no hierarchy of importance of gifts. Exception is made nowadays for Chairs of the District and the Connexional team but that is because they do not get access to funeral fees which we all need to supplement the stipend. Superintendents get a little more, but not much, given the extra responsibility. All of this gives us the DNA which says that we are all equal’.

This made a huge impact on the women from other traditions, especially those in churches which function hierarchically, many of whom did not feel they had experienced equality in any sense. Towards the close of one of the focus groups, one of the Catholic women said that if she were to receive only one of the gifts mentioned during the session, seeing women treated equally to men in the Catholic Church would be the gift she would most like to receive.

‘The Methodist Quadrilateral’

As I was listening to the women speak about Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience, the distinctive approach to the Christian life found in Methodism, I could not help but think this is a bedrock for women’s flourishing. As an ordained Anglican myself, whilst I was listening to the Methodist women, this struck me as an important
gift – the attention to ‘experience’, which creates a space for testimony, women’s as well as men’s. Commenting on her 20 years as an ordained woman, one Methodist said ‘I think that unlike other churches, Methodism lets the women shape and shift the culture. It’s because of the way we think about the Quadrilateral - it’s really important to us.’ This produced an intake of breath from a few of the women listening, as this is not a statement all women could make about their churches. This is an area for further theological reflection, and certainly one, which within the context of this research, felt like an exciting gift to a number of us from different churches.

Challenges Women Encounter

If it’s beginning to sound a little too ‘rosy in the garden’ of Methodism, then it might be time to take a look at some of the challenges women encounter when they are in leadership roles. Every Methodist woman, who participated in the research, was quite clear that the challenges were related to being women, and not because of Methodism as an institution. Nonetheless, what follows offers a snapshot of the kinds of issues the women face who are involved with a variety of roles and ministries in the Methodist church.

Being in the Minority

More than one woman noted that, in certain roles, women have been and continue to be in the minority. ‘In one of the more senior roles, as a woman, you’re always in a minority. That’s never consciously worried me, but I think there are differences in approach and style. And, sometimes I find that some of the conversations I can’t contribute to because the men will get together in the pub and not think to invite me. I don’t think they are being nasty, it’s more that they just would not think of it’.

Being Missional

A few of the ordained women identified themselves as ‘missional’ and described themselves as ‘constrained’, in part, because they were expected to take on a greater amount of ‘inside’ work than their male counterparts. One said, ‘I’m missional, that’s why I was ordained deacon, yet I find myself constantly squeezed into roles inside the church. I find it so frustrating.’ Another deacon was expected to set up a mother and toddler group for church members, which she said, ‘is neither my gift, nor my call’. There can be a tendency in churches to assume that women are better in pastoral roles. Whilst this is sometimes true, it is not always true.

Singleness

Being a single woman in ministry brings its own particular challenges, as one woman shared, ‘My challenges have not come from the institution itself, but instead they have come from congregations and also from being a single female in ministry. When I
came into circuit it was just assumed that I would manage. I could run the house, I could do the garden, I could do the shopping, cleaning, washing and do full-time ministry as well. Whereas, there were a couple of my male colleagues who were single, who went into circuit, and they had women offering to help them saying things like, ‘I’ve made you a cake’, or ‘I’ve made you a meal’. Further challenges can arise through being single, of a very different nature. One woman explained, ‘It took ages for the women in the church to realise I was not trying to steal, or flirt with, their husbands. If I am leading meetings with men in, it is because I am a presbyter, not because I’m interested in the men!’

Sexism and Sexual Harassment

Many of the women shared experiences of sexism and sexual harassment. One woman’s tales of men flirting with her was really disturbing: ‘Funeral directors can be a problem. And the comments on my appearance are always as I’m about to walk the coffin in. You can’t retort at that point. I’ve had all kinds of comments, such as “The churches would not be dying if all the ministers had a figure like yours” through to “do you fancy sitting on my lap at the wake?” It’s not great when you are about to take a funeral service.’

Working Ecumenically

Both ordained and lay Methodist women testified to being able to collaborate and work with others in their own tradition. However, three women mentioned that it was not always easy to work ecumenically, since ‘ecumenical work brings us into contact with leaders from churches which do not support women in leadership’. To explain what this was like in practice, one presbyter said that when she had moved churches, she came into an area where the leaders of the various traditions met together quite regularly. The other leaders were all men, and called their gathering ‘the fraternal’. She asked if it would be possible to change the name to something which did not suggest a ‘men-only group, since I am a woman’. Their response was a resounding ‘no’. She smiled at us and sighed, ‘you pick your battles, don’t you? And this was one I just do not have the time nor the energy to fight’.

Dual Roles

Some women working in churches are also mothers and noted that this can bring different challenges. As one woman said, ‘There were lots of questions about how I would do this with a baby. And when I go to a conference, people will come up to me and say “who’s looking after the children?” I tell them that my husband is and they ask me, “Will he be all right?” I say that I hope so, since he’s their father.’ For other women, the challenge was finding affordable childcare, and for others, it was about balancing motherhood and ministry.
Despite these challenges, the Methodist women were positive about their faith, their lives and their Church. Whilst they were realistic about some of the weaknesses within Methodism, they affirmed that they were able to flourish within its culture. The Methodist women I met during the course of the research not only shared the gifts of their church, but are gifts themselves. The testimony ‘Methodism is a safe place for women to be women’ is one which I shall be reflecting on for many years to come.

The final report from this research will be published October 2019. For further resources on receptive ecumenism and this project see https://www.dur.ac.uk/theology.religion/ccs/constructivetheology/receptiveecumensim/.

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