**Might women-only spaces in the curriculum for ministerial training better prepare women for future ministry?**

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**Principal Researcher:** Liz Shercliff

## Overview

### Introduction

The project addressed a critical gap in understanding the inclusion of women in ministerial training and examined a potential opportunity for overcoming barriers in theological education. The need for restructuring of curricula in TEIs if they are to become fully inclusive has been acknowledged (Jennings, 2020; Parker, 2022). Such changes rely on students feeling able to speak in class. Research suggests that marginalised students, including women, are silenced rather than enabled to speak, and that the absence of women’s voices in training leads to them being ill-prepared for ministry (Blue, 2012). Recent research suggests that women feel more able to speak in women-only groups (Shercliff, 2023, unpublished).

Working with three TEIs and one Church of England diocese, this project set out to explore whether the inclusion of an optional module, ‘Issues for Women in Ministry’ might enable women to address issues of gender oppression, to speak in the wider classroom context, and might better prepare them for authorised ministry.

## Methodology and Method

**Group conversation** each group engaged in a focused conversation. The foci of the conversations were:

* Issues for women in ministry: what gendered issues have you faced, what might have prepared you to face them.
* Where are women’s voices in the church?
* Reading the Bible: how have you been taught, what would you aim to teach?
* The shape of ministry – is it male?

**Final reflection** each conversation ended with a reflection responding to the question ‘so what would we like to see change?’

**Groups** consisted of theology students, trainee ministers, ordained ministers; women of different race, class, ability, sexuality.

## Key Themes

### What is unhelpful in TEIs?

1. *“Blokeishness.”*

All but one group commented on blokeish or laddish behaviour in their institution. They explained this as “loud,” “dominating,” “competitive” behaviour. One woman described it as “metaphorical manspreading.” One group found that tutors seemed to easily identify with “blokey” students. In one institution where self-defence for ministers was offered, women found that there was little understanding of how women feel unsafe just walking along at night, and that the focus was on attack. In another institution where women did not initially identify this kind of culture, I observed that during coffee time the centre of the room was occupied by male students and staff while women stood round the edges.

Two women commented that they had found the male culture easy to deal with because their previous careers had been in male dominated spaces. At the end of the discussion they each said that they felt the need to be less masculine because their behaviour could communicate to members of the congregation that women need to be more like men.

Some participants felt that biblical studies and theology should be taught so that all approaches are equal, rather than making feminist or Black theology subdivisions.

1. *Othering.*

Members of the LGBTQIA+ community said they felt anxious in some settings about letting their sexuality be known. One woman who was in a settled same sex partnership reported that her DDO (Diocesan Director of Ordinands) had said would be their “diocesan guinea pig.”

Another group felt that theology was seen as a hobby for women and that TEI staff were much more likely to encourage male students to think about academic careers. Others said they felt their selection panels had assumed they would be Self Supporting Ministers because women don’t expect to be paid.

One group engaged particularly with the “Disney-fication” of women, both in the Bible and in the Church. Women were made to fit particular models of niceness and gentleness.

Some mothers of young children pointed out the lack of understanding shown by tutors, who typically might say that as holidays were coming up students would be able to get on with some reading, without appreciating that holiday time for parents was very busy.

1. *Lack of Affirmation.*

Several group members said they had felt broken down but not built up by their training. Some felt infantilised or under-acknowledged despite long professional careers before seeking ordination. Others felt age was a problem because the Church’s emphasis on young vocations made them feel devalued.

A small number of participants suggested that there was a reluctance among staff to admit that the Church is male, and this made them feel unaffirmed. They also wanted to look at the 5 Guiding Principles from a justice perspective rather than/as well as a theological one.

A particularly striking phrase used in one group was “pernicious kindness.” They described it as others, staff or students, apparently showing kindness by offering assignment extensions, or suggesting they were busy or emotional and could not cope. These responses were seen as undermining and demeaning.

### What is helpful in TEIs?

1. *Women staff members*

All groups showed great appreciation for women staff members. One group had been at the college before a woman tutor was appointed, and remarked on the difference the tutor had made in the time she had been there.

1. *Honesty*

Several groups commented that few real questions were asked or addressed in class. The bible was often treated as a story with a self-evident meaning, rather than a text that might help real people understand the real world. It was felt that a topic based approach to the bible would be better than a canon shaped approach. This would enable people to deal with the Bible’s internal contradictions, without reacting negatively to them.

One participant suggested that tutors consistently adopt positivity as an approach to their subject, ignoring the fact that the Hebrew Bible also contains lament.

One group spoke of a tutor highlighting discriminatory practices in the Church, such as the timings of church meetings being suited to men who had partners at home to pick children up from school or put them to bed. They also appreciated a discussion about how different liturgy written around women’s life events might be.

1. *Flexibility*

There was much discussion in most groups about the fixedness of curriculum and content. Moodle was regarded as a problem here. Tutors decided what students should know, and planned how to tell them, without adapting content to student experience or questioning.

Others commented that flexible means of attendance should be available, as for women in particular, being away from home overnight could be very difficult and expensive. They felt that online teaching should also be offered.

## Would women-only spaces better prepare women for future ministry?

1. *Healing*

All four groups used the word “healing” to describe their experiences of being together. They attributed this to being in a place where they felt understood, and where they could talk about their experiences and be believed without having to “start from the beginning” or “earn a hearing.”

1. *Safety/understanding*

One group in particular explored the idea that they felt safe to propose and interrogate new ideas without being dismissed or condemned. They reported being “shut down” when trying to introduce ideas of the feminine divine in a theology class.

## Specific Areas for Reflection

1. How might we treat all approaches to theology and hermeneutics as equal, instead of (consciously or otherwise) teaching as though there is an objective/unbiased account and other approaches are divergent?
2. How might we create brave spaces where women students can support each other in facing gender-based issues?

## Changing the Curriculum/construction of knowledge

1. Several women agreed that in ministerial training they wanted to journey with others, rather than being told things. They felt a more flexible curriculum would be useful. Perhaps content should be curated (in Moodle?) so that students could access it if/when needed, but that class time should be focused more on thinking things through as a group guided by a tutor.
2. Two institutions felt that an accredited module called something like “Issues for women in ministry” would be appreciated but could not identify what it would replace. Others were more concerned about teaching modules so that they didn’t seem like feminist or Black theology was an add-on.
3. All groups agreed that women-only spaces would be appreciated and valued, that perhaps they should be facilitated by a staff member and take place on a monthly or half-termly basis. Some groups specifically resisted calling these “safe” spaces and opted for “brave” spaces instead.

## Specific Proposals

Each group was asked at the end of each session what proposal they would make to either Common Awards or TEIs as a result of their conversation. Two proposals were mentioned regularly:

1. Common Awards should develop a module on Issues for Women in Ministry.
2. TEIs should adjust timetables so that spaces for women to gather are facilitated.