

ALL THE SINGLE LADIES: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF SINGLE FEMALE PASTORS IN THE BAPTIST UNION OF NEW ZEALAND

HEATHER PENMAN AND ANDREW PICARD

Carey Baptist College
Auckland, New Zealand

Single female pastors (SFPs) face an array of difficulties in their theological training and pastoral positions in the Baptist Union of New Zealand (BUNZ). Few are called by churches and many experience differing forms of sexism in pastoral training and pastoral ministry.¹ Whilst many SFPs find themselves welcomed into various associate roles, they find the door is often closed to sole or senior pastoral roles. As a result, Baptist churches in New Zealand often miss the opportunity of receiving the gifts that SFPs offer to the denomination. This essay engages with SFPs in the BUNZ to listen and learn from their experiences.

As single and female, SFPs are a double minority in pastoral leadership in the BUNZ. This essay employed the minority group model to elevate, empower, and engage the underprivileged voice of SFPs in the BUNZ.² The SFPs were interviewed using semi-structured interviews to inquire about their experiences and explore the themes which they raised about being SFPs in the BUNZ. Their perspectives, concerns, and understandings of ministry in the BUNZ provide the qualitative data that forms the basis of this inquiry. We conclude this essay with the practical recommendations that the SFPs gave for future SFPs, churches, theological colleges, and denominational leadership to overcome the barriers to inclusion that they face in the BUNZ. The experiences and recommendations of the SFPs are not merely the conclusion of an academic essay. They are the strong voice of a minority who want to serve a denomination that they love, even though they do not always feel loved by the denomination.

Research Methodology

The data for this essay comes from semi-structured interviews conducted with SFPs in the BUNZ. Ethical consent was sought and granted from each of the participants and they were ensured of their rights to confidentiality and the ethical use of their data. The participants were aged from 30–70 years old and all had been in pastoral ministry for at least two years. Participants were invited to talk about their experiences as SFPs in the BUNZ and interviews were conducted individually. The interviews were based on introductory questions which allowed the SFPs to discuss topics that they believed were appropriate and pertinent, and

¹ Peter Glick and Susan T. Fiske, "The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory: Differentiating Hostile and Benevolent Sexism," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70 (1996): 491–512.

² Andrew Picard and Myk Habets, "Introduction: Theology and the Experience of Disability 'Down Under,'" in *Theology and the Experience of Disability: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Voices Down Under*, eds. Andrew Picard and Myk Habets (Oxford: Routledge, 2016), 5–6. This model is commonly associated with research concerning disability, but can arguably be used for other minority groups (including single female pastors).

their experiences and interpretations form the basis of this work. The interviews were transcribed and all direct quotes are from the participants.³

The Context of SFPs in the Baptist Union of New Zealand

One hundred years ago, females faced significant challenges and restrictions, especially in church leadership. There have been many advances for women in the last century and they now face less restrictions for church leadership. In New Zealand there are female lecturers in theological colleges, female presidents of the BUNZ, and female pastors and leaders in local churches. Whilst the BUNZ has made important advances in the empowerment of women, there remains a significant inequality in the number of female pastoral leaders in comparison to males.⁴ In 2016, there were 473 people employed as pastoral staff in the churches of the BUNZ and 350 of them are employed in assistant, associate, senior, or sole pastor roles.⁵ Of the 350 assistant, associate, senior, or sole pastors of the BUNZ, only forty-one of them were females and only seven of these forty-one were SFPs.⁶ There is a marked difference between the number of female and male pastoral staff in churches, and this disparity is amplified for SFPs.

Previous studies have been conducted globally and nationally on the role and experiences of women in ministry, however, there is a lack of research on SFPs and the unique challenges they face in pastoral ministry.⁷ Given that more than 1.2 million (37%) New Zealanders over fifteen years old consider themselves single, there is a pressing need to consider the specific challenges single people face.⁸ Singleness is increasing in New Zealand society and there is a strong likelihood that more single people will be seeking to enter ministry in the future. This essay focuses upon being female and single through the unique experiences of SFPs in the BUNZ. There is need for similar research into SFPs in other denominations, however, this study focuses on SFPs in the BUNZ.

³ We have chosen not to use individual identifiers for the various participants (e.g. Person A) to protect their anonymity. This was important given the small sample size from which we could draw.

⁴ The Baptist Union of New Zealand espouses equality for female pastors in *The Baptist Union of New Zealand Administration Manual* (Auckland: Baptist Union of New Zealand, 2016), 48-49.

⁵ This is based upon the statistics provided in *The Baptist Union of New Zealand Yearbook 2016* (Auckland: Baptist Union of New Zealand, 2016).

⁶ Four are sole charge pastors and three are associate pastors in church teams.

⁷ One example of global research on the experiences of women in ministry is Hallee Gray Scott, *Dare Mighty Things: Mapping the Challenges of Leadership for Christian Women* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014). In the New Zealand context, there have been studies conducted by some denominations: Women's Committee, *Enquiry into the Status of Women in the Church* (New Zealand: National Council of Churches in New Zealand, 1976). Christine Cheyne, *Made in God's Image: A Project Researching Sexism in the Catholic Church in Aotearoa (New Zealand)* (New Zealand: Catholic Commission for Justice, Peace and Development, 1990). Rosemary Neave, ed., *The Journey and the Vision: A Report on Ordained Anglican Women in the Church of the Province of New Zealand* (New Zealand: Women's Resource Centre, 1990).

⁸ "Census," Statistics New Zealand, <http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census.aspx>. The number increased from 990,336 in 1996 to 1,238,136 in 2013.

THE EXPERIENCES OF SINGLE FEMALE PASTORS

The daily duties of a SFP might well look like any other pastor, but their life experiences inside and outside the church are very different. SFPs have very different experiences than their married colleagues, and this is true within the BUNZ. Their journeys into ministry are quite unique, and so too is their experience of theological training. Whilst there is no singular fixed identity for SFPs, and there are a wide variety of perspectives on their experiences, they are united in the shared experiences of exclusion within the BUNZ. As one SFP noted, each isolated incident may seem insignificant, but in the context of the collective experience they contribute to a feeling of “death by a thousand paper cuts.” The data from the interviews suggests that we can learn from the SFPs’ experiences and their interpretations of these experiences. Most importantly, the interview data allows us to learn how SFPs can be better supported and empowered in their journey in pastoral leadership, as well as allowing us to learn from their pioneering work.

Experiences on the Journey into Pastoral Ministry

The support of family and churches was crucial for SFPs on their journey to ministry. “Family have always been really affirmative.... I did church leadership all the way through; small groups, speaking at the front, running youth group, running whole church camps, and no one ever batted an eyelid.” Others could not imagine God calling them to serve as church leaders because they had never seen a female pastor or elder in their church. As one recounts, the idea of females in ministry “was a standing joke.” Nevertheless, her pastor noticed her as an outspoken pre-schooler and proclaimed, “we will make a minister of her.”

The SFPs referred to God’s refinement of their gifts. Some developed and trained within local churches, while others, including one who later changed her career, attended Bible colleges before pastoring. Those that gradually grew into the role through church development had relatively affirming experiences and felt assured of God’s guidance.

Church families recognised God’s work in some of the SFPs. Most led youth groups, preached, or became deacons/elders/secretaries. One SFP’s church actively encouraged “next generation leadership.” After Bible college training her church invited her to preach, and later called her as pastor. For others, especially those who were not called to pastoral ministry in their home church, the process was much more difficult. When one SFP was denied a role as a deacon, the secretary of the church tried to reassure her by saying, “don’t take it personally, it’s just because you’re a woman.”

SFPs expressed the need to “trust that God would make a way.” Whilst this is true, some observed that female pastoral trainees had a much harder time than their male counterparts. Two SFPs noticed that some women in Bible colleges were deeply hurting, and desperately wanted to be pastors. One SFP, very thankful for God’s leading, stated, “I don’t know how a way would’ve been opened up if I had felt this desperate call of God (as I did) to be a pastor, and He had said to go to [College A]⁹ and train.... A lot have

⁹ College names have been changed for the sake of anonymity.

struggled terribly, hurtfully.” All SFPs confirmed that they had experienced various barriers to inclusion at Bible colleges and in church leaderships.

Experiences in Theological Education

All the SFPs interviewed for this research were theologically educated. When one attended College B the gender mix was approximately equal but no women were training for pastoral ministry.¹⁰ Another SFP was initially denied accreditation at the Baptist Assembly, along with several other women, after she completed her studies. More recent SFP trainees experienced low ratios of women to men who were training for pastoral leadership, and there were very few singles.¹¹ Several encountered an imbalance in conversations about wives, children, and budgets from within the theological colleges. These topics were important, but they felt that the experiences and needs of minority voices, including single females, were sidelined in favour of majority concerns. “You’re made to feel by proxy that the struggles you’re having aren’t as important, or are easier because you’re single.” Another felt that the intentionality of care was focused on married pastoral students. “[Married] pastoral students were often intentionally looked after by [College B], where singles were overlooked.”

All of the participants encountered opposition to their sense of call from other students at Bible college. For several of the SFPs, this was the first time they had encountered theological ideologies that opposed women in leadership. They had never considered that other Christians would question the legitimacy of their sense of call. Whilst it was necessary to engage the theological and biblical debates about women in leadership, the debates often extended beyond critical and constructive engagements in the classroom to hostile confrontations with other, mainly male, students. One SFP recalled a time as a student when she was “confronted with fellow male students, who remained complementarian throughout their training, and this was not addressed sufficiently by staff.” One endured disempowering experiences when “placed in churches that didn’t believe in women in leadership.” While in ministry this experience was repeated when she was given a complementarian pastoral student to oversee. This was not discussed with her before the student was placed in her church and it left her in the awkward position of overseeing a student who questioned the legitimacy of her call in a church that supported her ministry.

One SFP noted that there had been a conservatizing of Baptist views on women in leadership and a decline in the advocacy of women in leadership. This silence had created a vacuum in which varying perspectives had filled the void. “[There] was a season in Baptist churches where there was much more commitment towards helping women find their place in ministry.” Despite these struggles, competent female pastors were still emerging. Yet as several SFPs highlighted, the gifts of many female church members are still being overlooked. SFPs noted that many female Baptist leaders and trainees had changed

¹⁰ The SFP related earlier days when women only studied as lay-people (personal interest) or for mission preparation.

¹¹ Most fellow pastoral students were either married already or married by the end of training.

denominations, away from Baptists, and others had discontinued study because they had become disheartened that they were not called or well supported by churches.

Experiences of the Call Process

The four SFPs who were encouraged into pastoral ministry by their own churches, and subsequently called by them, felt affirmed. When the name of one SFP was put to the church for voting, “the whole church erupted in cheering.” Nevertheless, a person from another church told her “the only reason they must have put you forward is because there were no other males around.” Another SFP stipulated that for any pastor to thrive, both the pastor and the congregation should prayerfully seek God’s will before issuing or accepting a call. In her case, the church prayerfully “did their own theology for several weeks. [Through this process], the church felt that I was the one God had called for them.” Consequently, she “felt no animosity toward [her] gender as a leader” and believes “God does not call you to a place that disempowers you.” This positive call experience and perspective was a minority among SFPs, and the journey was much harder for SFPs when the church did not already know them.

One SFP recounted how a church was seeking a married male to fill a pastoral vacancy. When all prospective candidates turned them down and the SFP’s name was put forward, “the senior pastor had to preach and teach about the role of women in ministry” to allay concerns about women in ministry. The church then resisted calling her an “assistant pastor” and instead called her a “pastoral assistant”. SFPs have experienced hurtful and inconsiderate behaviour, and open discrimination in call processes. One interviewee recounted the experience of “churches dismissing you outright because of your gender.” Another SFP heard people saying, “they’re way too young to lead a church.” Whilst this potentially may have been the case, she perceived that there were some double standards, and she suggested that “if it was a male, there wouldn’t be any problem.” Several voiced concerns about being disregarded when people inappropriately assumed SFPs have insufficient life experience and were unable to understand married congregants. One pointed out that it would be equally difficult for a young married male pastor with children to understand a single middle-aged female approaching menopause with no children.

Some SFPs have been treated as a back-up plan if all other options fail. One was treated as a back-up plan three times by the same church. The church initially expressed their desire for her as pastor, but kept interviewing married men with children. Twice they rescinded the call they issued to her with profuse apologies. Two months later, with no suitable candidates, the church re-approached her. Hurt, but having forgiven, she re-applied only to find that once again she was rejected in favour of another applicant “who was a male, [and] had a young family.” Once again, the male applicant turned them down and the church approached her a third time. This time she declined, stating, “I’d rather not be your second, third or fourth choice in that position. That’s twice where I feel like I’m your back-up plan.” She questioned: “What is more important? Having a family with children for the Sunday school, or having someone who is divinely called (regardless of age, sex, marital status, or the presence of children)?”

Another concern raised by SFPs is that Terms of Call agreements have, at times, been used as an excuse for discrimination against them. Call committees are made up of volunteers from the church who interview candidates for pastoral vacancies. Given the volunteer basis of the committees, interviews can sometimes ask questions that would not be legally permissible elsewhere. One SFP described her experience of facing unethical questions from a call committee about how her menstrual cycle would impinge on her pastoring abilities. These kinds of unethical questions are not legally permissible.

Experiences as Pastors

All the SFPs gratefully described the overwhelming support they received from their churches once they were employed as pastors. Some have appreciated working on mixed gender staff teams where male senior pastors have taught congregations about women in ministry and have developed healthy team relationships. Others enjoy churches that encourage their use of God's gifts, and some have long-standing prayer support, good elders, mentors and supervisors. All this, coupled with God's strength and grace, has provided security and permission for them to be all God has called them to be. Nevertheless, challenges remain.

Many SFPs have experienced various forms of sexism in their roles. This can take the form of either benevolent or hostile sexism.¹² One SFP, when taking a funeral, had a visiting pastor who struggled with a female pastor being responsible for the funeral. She found she needed to “act with graciousness and be quite firm in order for the occasion to run smoothly for the family.” Another SFP highlighted the gendered expectations that other pastors have about food and kitchen responsibilities. She felt pressured to bring baking and serve tea, yet considered that male pastors were rarely expected to provide home baking. Another SFP took a healthy lunch to share at a regional pastors’ meeting, only to have another male pastor comment that “you’re really falling into the female’s role here in bringing us lunch.” This SFP felt that her colleagues, many of whom identify as theological egalitarians, ideologically supported her. However, this needed to be expressed practically and not just ideologically. “[The] nitty gritty of life tells a different story; whether they pick up their own dishes, whether they make snide/joking remarks, what theology books they read, what Facebook conversations/posts they have.” These examples illustrate an ingrained and often unacknowledged sexism that contrasts SFPs with male pastors in such a way that SFPs are positioned as abnormal and deviant from the expected cultural norm of pastoral identity.

SFPs found that gendered expectations of “femininity” was particularly apparent amongst pastors, but this needed to be dealt with carefully. Two SFPs expressed caution about challenging people’s assumptions of gendered expectations. “[It’s] okay to be upset when things are feeling unfair, but it’s not helpful to go pushing the women’s rights wheelbarrow all the time as it puts people’s backs up.” SFPs fear that they may be branded troublesome and further marginalised if they speak against the gendered expectations of the dominant group identity. None of the SFPs wanted to abandon their sense of personal

¹² Glick, “The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory”. Benevolent sexism is deeply ingrained within our culture (jokes, expectations, and omissions to include women).

identity in favour of becoming more stereotypically feminine. One interviewee was criticised for not being feminine enough. She was told, “you’re such a strong personality and so intelligent and articulate you’ll probably never get married unless you dumb it down a bit.” Needless to say, she “did not want to get married on false pretences.” Several SFPs voiced concerns that “a lot of our Baptist [pastors] are not secure enough [in Christ]” and “some view competent gifted females as a threat.”¹³ Consequently, some SFPs have been restricted from preaching and leading, and have been given administrative roles instead.

Often it was other women who were the biggest critics of SFPs. Many SFPs had experienced women (and men) who walked out during their sermons. One woman exclaimed “how can she do that? She’s a woman!” Another SFP had a self-proclaimed female prophet “come and denounce [her] when [she] was leading a service.” In the environment of sexism, and without the support of role models, many SFPs have doubted God’s calling. One initially objected to God, praying; “you can’t ask me to do that, I’m not gifted to do that!” In many cases, it is by performing the role of pastor that SFPs have gained their own sense of confidence and the confidence of others.

Some congregants who opposed women in leadership have struggled to reconcile their theology and preconceptions with the experience of SFPs as pastors. One man commented to a SFP, “I don’t approve at all with what you’re doing, but I totally approve of how you’re doing it.” Another exclaimed, “how come you can teach with such authority, yet look as though you’re under authority yourself?” She laughed, saying “that’s God.”¹⁴ This SFP found that many women who held entrenched reservations about women in leadership would later acknowledge that “they’d changed their attitudes.” In one case, a woman who had reservations about a SFP later became an important supporter and mentor to the SFP.

Several of the SFPs felt that, relative to male pastors, they have both advantages and disadvantages. Whilst men were generally accepted in their pastoral role, some females experienced people “making calls about [their] ability because of [their] gender.” Many SFPs felt that people often focused on the gender and marital status of a pastor instead of their sense of call from God to ministry. SFPs found that many people believed that pastors were males, or have stereotypical masculine attributes, and they struggled to imagine anything different.¹⁵ These assumptions influenced the SFPs. Three of the interviewees initially presumed males would make better pastors and they were confused as to why God had called them. Their views have since changed, but this showed the power of these gendered environments to limit imagination.

¹³ One SFP stated, “As you get older and senior pastors become younger, sometimes initially they can be threatened as they’re struggling to find their place.”

¹⁴ She reflected that it can be helpful to have a light-hearted sense of humour, but also warned against “elevating yourself over others and relishing in their discomfort.”

¹⁵ This comment was made by a SFP in an interview. Another said, “when you ask 100 people to close their eyes and think about what a pastor is, they’re going to give you gender stereotypes. So, a man, quite well educated, possibly married. And there is this idea of two for one that you hear a lot around churches that if you get a man as a pastor, his wife will be involved in the church – maybe running the creche or part of the kids programme. Too bad if she’s a doctor or has already got a job that has nothing to do with any of those ministry areas. It would be interesting to see whether they write down the other sort of things like character traits, gifts, teaching, leadership, loyalty, mercy, and things around call; or whether they think of male, married with kids, sensible, not a drug dealer.”

Experiences of Being Single in the Pastorate

SFPs often faced public attention about their private lives, sexuality and relationship status. One recalled the hurt when, because of her singleness, she “had people question [her] sexuality openly.” More commonly, most SFPs have politely endured well-meaning but unsolicited dating and marriage advice, as well as heckling regarding male friends. They often received statements about “ticking body clocks,” and a variety of unhelpful books that they had been given. One SFP said these “books have this unwritten idea that everyone needs to be married or else they’re somehow stuffed.” She was given other books on how to be a single woman in today’s world and noted that “it is patronising. There is no way in the world they’re going to give a book to a man about being a man in today’s world, or being a man in the church, or being a man who happens to be a pastor. ‘Here’s a man’s guide to pastoring.’” SFPs acknowledge that people genuinely wanted them to be happy, but they did not realise how unhelpful it was to receive uninvited declarations from parishioners that they were “praying for you to find a husband.” SFPs felt that some people equated marriage with happiness without considering the SFP’s observation that “people can be married and still feel extremely isolated.” Many SFPs testified that Christ alone brings true joy. Whilst their identity was rooted in Christ, some SFPs still grappled with loneliness, grieving a husband’s death, and grieving lost dreams of marriage and family. This made the question of marriage complex for many SFPs.

One SFP felt that the church needed to be “held accountable for the idol it makes of marriage.”¹⁶ She identified the disparity between Paul’s ambivalent statements about marriage (1 Cor. 7:8), and her experience of New Zealand Baptist’s church culture where marriage was seen as the ultimate goal. One church member told her that marriage was “the best way you’ll ever get to experience God’s love,” and that it was only once someone was married that they could really “experience God’s love.” Furthermore, she was told that it was only once she had a child that she could “understand what it means to love.” The SFP believed that this view was theologically inaccurate and carried the dangerous implication that people who were childless, such as the Lord Jesus Christ, could never glimpse the fullness of God’s love.

The SFPs felt that many churches and training institutions struggled to understand their challenges and needs, especially when it came to finances. Some of the SFPs experienced significant pay disparities from their married colleagues. One had her housing allowance reduced to one third of the Baptist recommendation because she was “only one person” and she could go flatting. Other aspects of monetary negotiations were also difficult and many found churches assumed that “just because you’re single everything is easier.” An interviewee stated that whilst it is true that she has less people to look after, “it doesn’t mean I have more of everything, and it doesn’t mean that I don’t have the same struggles going on in my family [or with friends].” She noted that there are few people or environments where she can talk about her particular issues. Her problems seemed to be whitewashed because they were different than the marital norm. “My life is viewed as: ‘oh it’s just easy because there’s one of you.’”

¹⁶ There are so many “pressures that the church unknowingly or knowingly puts on people to be married and the stigma that it puts on people that aren’t.”

Experiences in Pastoral Care and Pastoral Relationships

Sensible pastoral care and relationship boundaries are important for all pastors regardless of age, gender, or marital status. The interviewees spoke about the need for appropriate boundaries and safe practices.¹⁷ Many SFPs were in pastoral teams where others could visit, counsel, and pray for males. Such systems were necessary because some of the SFPs had respectable married men offer unwanted sexual advances. Unfortunately, when one SFP talked to her senior pastor about it, “he didn’t want to know.” The SFPs were aware of the need to be wise in their pastoral interactions. “You have to be enormously wise because human sexuality is the weirdest thing. If you’re going to work closely with someone you have to guard your heart, because human sexuality is a really weird and powerful force.” However, many SFPs felt that they were held under constant suspicion. Some in their congregations believed that a SFP might lead husbands astray or have inappropriate relations with unmarried congregants. In the experience of some SFPs, it had been married men who had made inappropriate sexual advances, not SFPs. “I’ve had people who have jokingly asked me if I’m after their husbands. And I would imagine that those conversations wouldn’t happen if you were married, but then people always have this view that the woman runs off with the man.” She wondered what the ratios were of men running off with women. These settings imagined SFPs to be highly sexualised, but the SFPs felt that this was highly unjustified and unfair. “As [single] females we might just be wanton Jezebels that might run off with any man that moves. But I highly doubt it.”

Some SFPs have developed, or had developed for them, coping strategies to uphold relational boundaries because of the suspicion with which they were held. One SFP had to walk in a public place whenever she met with an elder, despite their age difference of several decades. Another SFP commented that “being female and single makes it harder for males to come to me for pastoral care.” In the last few years, she had experienced two males who perceived her pastoral care as a form of attraction. More positively, for others, their male congregants found it easier to express their emotions to SFPs, and many females felt “like they receive more pastoral care now.”

Experiences at Baptist Events

There was a consensus among interviewees that Baptist events were sometimes discouraging and unhelpful. One SFP was often asked, as a result of her gender, if she was an associate pastor.¹⁸ As a sole pastor, she found these assumptions disempowering. Other SFPs found the implicit and explicit assumptions of some speakers at Baptist conferences and events were gendered biased. Many speakers seemed to believe only in male pastors and elders and they employed gender exclusive language to describe pastors. Some of the

¹⁷ For example, one SFP directs men to male pastors on the team, while another stated, “if a bloke came and really wanted to talk to me, we’d just leave the door open and people would be around in the foyer. So you can talk perfectly privately, but you’re observable and nothing can be misconstrued.”

¹⁸ She stated, “This feels disempowering and perhaps reflects a complementarian belief system that resides in the Baptist Churches of NZ. Although I would suspect that most pastors would say that they were egalitarian.”

conference seminars sought to address the issues that women experienced in leadership and empower them in their work. However, some of the SFPs found that these seminars became platforms at which women shared their painful stories that they were experiencing in Baptist churches, rather than constructive proposals to move forward. As a result, some of the SFPs chose not to attend these seminars because they were consumed with the negative issues and the SFPs preferred to “be around other positive leaders, of either gender.” It is important to note that one SFP highlighted one annual Baptist retreat as an empowering experience for her as it was much more gender neutral.

While many SFPs enjoyed the annual Baptist Hui (formerly the Annual Baptist Gathering), it was often the environment where SFPs encountered the most hurtful comments from their peers. One SFP had a male Baptist pastor tell her, “I can’t believe you want to be a minister! Every time you get up front, every man in the congregation will be undressing you with his eyes.” As the SFP noted, women of the same inclination would no doubt do the same to him, and this was no reason for him to stop following God’s call. Another SFP witnessed how “people (males in particular) responded when a female got up to speak,” and thought “they were quite rude.” One mentioned that while it is great having female speakers, they were often in panel settings where men dominated. “They have women speakers, which is great, but the way discussions are facilitated is disappointing. The men with the loudest voices, who want to be heard and known, seem to rule the discussions and own the microphone. I feel no need to be ‘the leader of the pack,’ but feel the female voice is disempowered because of the process.” Another interviewee noted the Union’s unwillingness to enforce adherence to its official stance that endorses women at all levels of leadership. This stood in contrast to the Union’s enforcement of its official stance on same-sex marriage. “One of the discussions that came up at the Hui was that there are other churches who don’t agree with the official stance of the Union on gay marriage and they’re about to get clobbered. But there are also churches in the Baptist Union who don’t agree with the official stance on females in ministry and yet they’re still left alone in that.”

Empowering Experiences

The SFPs described several positive experiences in ministry that shed important light upon how they could be empowered in their ministry. SFPs enjoyed leadership and decision-making, being role models, having their own space, and having time with loyal friends. Several SFPs were marriage celebrants and enjoyed preparing couples for marriage. Some valued identifying with other singles in their congregation. Several mentioned that gender and singleness were not their primary concerns.¹⁹ Above all, they all felt content serving Christ and have satisfying ministries.

The support SFPs received along their journey has been immensely appreciated. Churches ensured that they cared and prayed for SFPs, offered them practical help, encouraged them in their giftings, affirmed them in their ministry, and empowered them to grow into God's calling. One SFP was especially encouraged

¹⁹ Some did not realise they were the only female on teams until someone else pointed it out.

at her commissioning when the church leaders publicly stated, “we are not giving you too tight a job description because we do not know all that God wants you to become.” She found this to be powerfully permission giving and encouraging. Most SFPs emphasised the support of mentors, supervisors, elders, senior pastors, and many experienced male leaders who intentionally promoted women in ministry. Several SFPs have been asked to preach in other churches, and one found her inclusion in a theological college’s preaching development group to be very affirming.²⁰ Most importantly, the SFPs trusted that God had called, equipped, empowered and guided them.

THE CONVICTIONS AND MINISTRY OF SINGLE FEMALE PASTORS

SFPs were convinced that their sense of identity and calling did not come from their role, gender, or marital status, it came from God. Being a pastor, female, and single “is not the most defining thing about a [SFP].” Many participants stressed that their sense of identity comes from who they are in Christ. “My identity is in Christ; not because I’m single and not because I’m female and not because I’m a pastor.” The SFPs understood themselves to be part of Christ’s body, the church, where every member is essential and valued. Some noted the significance of Paul’s image of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12, where the Holy Spirit, according to God’s wisdom and purpose, gives gifts for the glory of God and for the common good of the church. As one said, “do what God has gifted and equipped you for.”²¹ Several SFPs felt that “if God calls, He makes a way,” even if some ways are more challenging.

The participants celebrated and enjoyed that God created them with unique combinations of giftings, characters and experiences. They felt secure with who they are and with God’s calling, and they trusted that as they continued to follow God’s call, the Spirit’s work through them would speak for itself. This became true for all the SFPs, as others came to notice God’s work evidenced in their ministries. One SFP was told “I’ve never agreed with women in ministry, but if it’s like you then I can cope with it and it’s perfectly all right!” As one SFP noted, people are not won over by argument, but by the revelation that God is at work through SFPs, whether they like it or not.

The SFPs are aware of the difficult passages of scripture which others highlighted to restrict their ministries, and they have come to different exegetical conclusions. They do not feel restricted because “the whole counsel of scripture puts those tricky passages in perspective.” SFPs respected other’s right to hold different viewpoints, however, several SFPs considered that much of the opposition, theological and otherwise, was based on personal insecurity and an uncritical adherence to tradition.²² Whilst they had read the scholarly debates on the contentious biblical texts, SFPs were not drawn to these texts or prolonged debates on their interpretation. Instead, the SFPs were drawn to biblical texts that attested to God calling, equipping and gifting all believers, often in surprising ways.

²⁰ It is “empowering because it says that you are accepted by male leaders as a respected preacher.”

²¹ One suffered terribly in her role for a time because she was not free to do what she was gifted to do.

²² One SFP also mentioned that sometimes when people have issues in their personal lives, their views on female pastors are occasionally used as the external outlet for their own inner turmoil.

The SFPs noted biblical texts that revealed God's radical empowerment of unexpected leaders in the church, which confounded expected norms. Participants were drawn to passages in scripture that showed God equipping and empowering a variety of unlikely candidates for leadership. This empowerment of unlikely candidates is especially prevalent in the book of Acts where the Spirit is poured out on all flesh and women are given the eschatological empowerment of the Spirit to prophesy. Craig Keener, in his recent four volume work on Acts, has noted the gender egalitarianism that pervades the text. "Luke's narrative confirms the charismatic gender egalitarianism of his programmatic statement here, reporting prophetesses as well as prophets."²³ In an extended excursus on the topic, Keener surveyed Luke's perspective on women and gender and concluded that Luke was among the more progressive, not less progressive, voices on women in his era.²⁴

The participants found such texts liberating because they revealed the surprising ways that God breaks down the barriers to inclusion in leadership. God's actions often confound the church's settled wisdom on leadership. As Luke Timothy Johnson has argued, much of the book of Acts is focused on the church learning how to keep pace with God's initiatives.²⁵ In Acts, God's pioneering action led the church to learn to accept the people who God had *already* accepted. In similar fashion, the SFPs desired that more people would recognise God's calling, gifting and work in and through them, and learn to accept that God has already accepted them. Their sense of acceptance and empowerment from God extended outwards as they desired that the church would learn to rejoice in God's use of *all* people who can participate together as the body of Christ.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM SINGLE FEMALE PASTORS

Recommendations for Other SFPs

In their interviews, SFPs offered reflections and recommendations for current/future SFPs, churches, mentors, training institutions, and the BUNZ. Their suggestions and recommendations form the basis of a hope and an orientation. The hope is that the BUNZ will receive SFPs as gifts to the church, and the orientation is for others to receive their ministry, spirituality, and discipleship that has been fortified through trials.

SFPs have encountered concerns about their gender, maturity, experience and safety. In the context of prejudice and oppression, SFPs stress that other SFPs considering ministry must find their identity in Christ. One participant stated that future SFPs will need to find security in their identity in Christ and know that "God is interested in what we are becoming more than what we are doing." One of the dangers she

²³ Craig Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary. Volume 1. Introduction and 1:1 – 2:47* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2012), 884.

²⁴ Keener, *Acts, Vol. 1*, 638.

²⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*. Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 186–87.

sensed about the pastoral calling was that identity can be found in the office of pastor, and she reiterated the need to have a “solid sense of who you are and your calling.” When SFPs are secure in their identity in Christ they found that they did not need to prove themselves or try to be like others. They found that they could rejoice in who God had made them to be and how God used them. One commented, “when a person is secure in their calling, gifts, and abilities, then there is an ease about [their gender].” While people may object to who God chooses to use, SFPs believed that the Spirit’s work through them would speak for itself and bring change. While some situations may call for discussions, the SFPs strongly discouraged arguments.²⁶ Instead, they recommended prayer, respect and patience that allowed the Spirit to convince people that God calls SFPs to pastoral roles. Likewise, they felt that good relational skills were vital, as well as a good sense of humour and a willingness to hold hurtful comments lightly. The recommendation to hold hurtful comments lightly was not a commitment to passivity, and the need to grieve, protest and attend to the emotional toll of sexism and exclusion remained important. SFPs stressed the need for supervision and good support networks for all pastoral ministers, and they felt that these were especially important for SFPs.

Recommendations for Churches

The SFPs were enthusiastic to see all people empowered to grow in the church, and they felt it was important that churches actively encouraged all people to use their gifts. The SFPs knew from their own experience how important it was to be empowered for ministry and they had a particular emphasis upon developing a culture of empowerment in their churches. They wanted to develop a culture where gifts were identified, celebrated and grown. One commented that “there were things that I would never have done if I hadn’t been encouraged into it by other people. I started my speaking career reading the scriptures behind a little wooden lectern, and I felt terrified.” In permission-giving environments, potential leaders of a vast variety are nurtured and developed. When asked how SFPs could be affirmed, several offered an alternative approach. “Single? So what! Woman? So what! They [have] been called by God to be a pastor, so how do we help them find the best place for that to be expressed.” When it came to affirming people in leadership, “you affirm them in their job, appreciate them for their gifts, skills and talents, and you encourage them to use those things in their ministry.”

The SFPs noted that not all people share their ideals of empowerment, and they may need to lead strategically in this area. “Churches may need to be affirming to females (in general) for roles beyond normal stereotypes.” Some of the interviewees suggested that churches could give ample preaching opportunities to associate SFPs and freedom to develop ministries according to their gifts. They also felt that male

²⁶ Instead, one suggested that “God will win people over as we are God-honouring, don’t emasculate men, and do a good job as God has called us. It’s not helpful arguing the point.”

colleagues should not feel threatened if SFPs are better at some things, as we are members of one body. As one SFP stated, the gift of team ministry is that “people’s gifts complement and affirm one another.”²⁷

SFPs were clear that when a SFP was called, it was vital that the church learnt to “openly articulate the reason why your church has female pastors.” In settings where churches had not examined and publicly articulated its biblical and theological convictions about SFPs, the SFP was often left to justify their own existence in the church they lead. SFPs suggested that churches may need to engage in biblical and theological study on the role of SFPs; preach on the value of women in ministry; work pastorally with those who were shifting their expectation of a pastor; and amend wording in constitutions and contracts to be gender inclusive. Churches may need external help and support to engage in this kind of critical self-reflection.

SFPs noted that they are often passed over in search processes as a result of conscious and unconscious bias. Likewise, SFPs wanted churches to evaluate whether they were treating SFPs equitably, especially when it came to stipends and compensation. This cry for equity extended to pastoral expectations and SFPs wanted churches to learn to appreciate their unique contributions rather than assessing their pastoral performance based on married males. Such comparative approaches created an unconscious norm which was then used to assess all others through an inequitable framework.

SFPs do not need churches to fix their singleness. SFPs do not appreciate being given patronising books or attempts to marry them off that treat them “as second-class citizens.” Like Jesus and Paul, SFPs did not believe there is anything lacking in who they are, nor do they feel they have missed out on life experiences in their singleness. SFPs did not enjoy being precluded from social events attended by married people and they ask that churches develop cultures where singles feel validated and welcomed as part of the family. As an aside, SFPs asked that this not be done by creating a singles group in the church as it can create further feelings of isolation.

Ultimately, SFPs desire that they be treated as any other person called by God to minister. They hope that their character would be more important as a gauge for ministerial appropriateness than their singleness; that their relationship with Christ would be more important than requiring a relationship with a male; and that the God-given gifts and sense of call on their life would be more important than restrictions on gender.

Recommendations for Theological Colleges

Theological colleges seek to resource the church by funding the imagination of their students with the gospel to bring redemptive change in church and society. In order for all students, including single females, to experience this reality, SFPs recommend theological colleges improve their language and their actions. The SFPs recommended that there be more empowerment of their voice in conversations and more active validation of their role as single women in ministry. This would require theological colleges to ensure that

²⁷ One SFP described support networks as crucial in sole charge situations and having teams of people to help with pastoral care and other tasks was invaluable.

pastoral training settings were not always focused on children and spouses. Similarly, SFPs requested that lecturers evaluate their language and content to ensure it does not assume Christian leaders are married males. SFPs desired more active biblical and theological teaching on the role of women in leadership in general, and SFPs in particular. Such teaching would not only equip the students but also advocate for women and SFPs amongst Baptist churches and the BUNZ. Some SFPs felt concerned that they had been placed with churches and supervisors who had not supported them in leadership. The SFPs wanted future SFPs to be placed with churches and supervisors who supported them and did not challenge the legitimacy of their pastoral leadership or calling.

Recommendations for the Baptist Union of New Zealand

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the BUNZ facilitated discussions on the role of women in leadership and concluded with a statement that empowered women in all forms of ministry leadership.²⁸ SFPs believed that this statement was not well known or well-regarded and it needed refreshment and reaffirmation by the churches. Whilst statements by the BUNZ were seen as helpful, SFPs wanted these to be followed up with action and clear guidelines for churches.

SFPs felt that Baptist churches were less accessible for female leaders and some had moved to other denominations to serve in leadership. Two interviewees cited examples of female pastors who had changed denominations because these denominations were more accepting and supportive of women in leadership. This is a worrying trend, and SFPs wanted the BUNZ to address the issues that contribute to the barriers to inclusion that women face so that no further female leaders are lost.

SFPs would like the BUNZ to be proactive advocates for them and other female leaders. Similarly, they would like Regional Missional Leaders to actively commend prospective SFPs to churches in the same way they do for their married counterparts (who are mostly males). Finally, SFPs would like the BUNZ to explore new methods for participation at the annual Baptist Hui that enables minority voices, like SFPs, to be heard. This would require speakers to realise that not all pastors present are married males. Some SFPs noted that this issue would be quickly resolved if some of the speakers were the SFPs themselves.

CONCLUSION

This study has employed the minority group model to empower the voices and perspectives of SFPs in the BUNZ. This group of people have faced, and continue to face, many barriers to inclusion as pastoral leaders in Baptist churches. As one SFP stated, “There seems to be some deeply ingrained resistance in the Baptist churches to really be open and welcoming and affirming and encouraging and supportive of women in ministry.” In the face of much opposition, SFPs have learnt to place their sense of identity and legitimacy in God’s hands and trust that it is God who has called them. They have found great encouragement in

²⁸ Baptist Union of New Zealand, *Administration Manual*, 48-49.

knowing from scripture that God is often at work in and through people that the establishment would demand God has no right to be working. Further encouragement has come from churches, leaders, family and friends who have empowered them, and they want others to learn from these leaders. These learnings would require theological and structural changes within the denomination and theological colleges. Such changes should not be seen as a reduction of the BUNZ's richness but an expansion.

Above all, this study has shown the remarkable graciousness, tenacity, and wisdom of the participants who have pioneered a pathway for future SFPs in the BUNZ. They have not only pioneered a pathway that will benefit future SFPs, they have pioneered a pathway that has benefitted and enriched the BUNZ, and continues to do so. This pioneering work has been in the face of much opposition, but they have known God's calling and graciousness through it all. It is to this end, the glory of God, that all participants gave witness. We are grateful for their time and their courageous witness.