

Tough questions for all our churches

By Juliet Kilpin

Here's a little quiz for you. It's a multiple choice.

1. Why are there proportionately more female ministers in the inner city than male ministers?
 - a. Women have more guts than men
 - b. Women are less worried about money than men
 - c. Inner city churches are more liberal
 - d. Inner city churches are more desperate

a. Women have more guts than men

If you have chosen 'a' then you are probably a woman!

It is a common perception (misconception?) that urban ministry is tough and only the most courageous can hack it. So why is it that more male ministers choose the so-called 'easier' locations in the suburbs rather than the inner city? And why is it that so few male ministerial students preparing for settlement prioritise urban communities on their profile? And why do so many of them say that they would consider it only if their wives would let them?

As someone who has recently moved out of the inner city after nineteen years I certainly wouldn't criticise someone for putting their family first, but I do sometimes wonder if some of our male ministers use their wives as a shield protecting them from the onslaught of difficult pastorates.

There are of course men who have prioritised the urban and they stand out in a crowd for having done so, and I honour all that they have given and what they stand for.

I do sometimes think that the Salvation Army have one over us in that all married officers are trained together and, because it is an army people, have to be prepared to go wherever they are sent. Officers used to find out on the day they graduated where they were going, and would have three days to pack and depart! Our Baptist ecclesiology might not allow that, but I do sometimes wonder if ministers should covenant to a certain number of years in the inner city during their ministry. If every minister gave three years alone, that would make such a huge impact not only on our inner cities but on the character and experience of our pastors.

b. Women are less worried about money than men

Research has shown that there are more female ministers in our grant-aided churches than male. Why is this? Are women less worried about money? I know I am less organised with money than my husband, but does that mean all women are less worried

about it? Who knows? But the repercussions of this is obviously that there are more grant-aided churches in urban communities, and women seem to be more prepared to go there.

Is it that men are conditioned to provide security for their family and bring in a steady wage? Or is it that some women in these situations are backed up by husbands with greater income who can support their risky ministry?

c. Inner city churches are more liberal

It has often been said that inner city churches are more liberal. Having been in the inner city for so long I am now convinced that it isn't out of choice but it is because our urban communities face issues earlier than elsewhere. The question of whether you should marry people who live together or who are divorced, or dedicate a child born out of wedlock is not a new question to most urban churches nowadays which are today grappling with whether you should let a drug addict lead a house-group or an alcoholic lead communion, or whether you should shop an illegal immigrant to the police, (only one of our marriages in Shadwell over ten years was not a re-marriage).

So are there more women because the inner cities are more liberal theologically, or is it because they are more forward thinking theologically? Or is it simply because there is so much else to think about that they really can't be bothered to waste precious time on the whole debate and just want to get on with being a relevant Christian presence in our forever-changing urban communities with those who are prepared to get involved?

d. Inner city churches are more desperate

A few years ago a friend of mine was on the settlement list. One suburban church he went to look at had an interview process on a par with that of a Managing Director for a corporate company. At the same time a church in London which was looking for a minister appointed the first person prepared to come and preach with a view...a woman.

Is there some truth in the fact that because so few ministers are prepared to look at inner city churches that when someone does they are sometimes snapped up in an instant? And is there some truth in the fact that whilst some suburban churches are happy to recommend female church members to the Ministerial Recognition Committee, when it comes to looking for their own minister would not consider a female themselves?

Perhaps it's not that some urban churches are more desperate but that some suburban churches are just a little too choosy for comfort and church has become just a little too much like a business.

Conclusion

In truth I don't know the answer to the question of why there are proportionately more female ministers in the inner city, but there certainly are. There are lots of questions here which I would urge the ministry department to invest some serious research into. The shocking truth is that in a denomination which has been ordaining female ministers

for eighty years we are still way behind many of our counterparts. Even almost half of Anglican ordinands are now female, and they have only been ordaining deacons since the mid 80s and priests since the mid 90s.

Whilst our statistics supposedly look like they are improving we still need to ask tough questions about our Baptist culture and why only a shocking 10% of our ministers are female, why it is still such a huge step for women to go to college, (I was asked if I was a man in a skirt at my interview...happy days!), why there are so few female regional ministers and why so many female ministers end up in roles outside the local church. There are many things which make me proud to be a Baptist, but I have to admit that this is not one of them...in fact I find it all a little embarrassing, don't you?



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