

## Niggles not mountains in women's ministry today



Revd Becca Bell, priest in charge of six churches in Southeast Cornwall, firmly believes that women's ministry has come a very long way in 25 years, but that there's still more road ahead. Revd Becca is immensely grateful for the work undertaken by all those who have gone before, "I really can't comprehend what they had to go through, so that I can be here today, doing a job I love."

Meeting Revd Becca, it's striking how young she looks, but just writing those few words sums up the irritations faced by women the world over, especially in ministry. Who would comment on what a man looks like? Yet the fact remains she does look young and is a woman and is often patronised as a result, frequently enduring mansplaining. "But these are just niggles

compared to the mountains that women have had to climb in previous years. I am actually very blessed where I am, supported and surrounded with people full of grace -even when I am suggesting yet more changes!"

Revd Becca has worked hard to get where she is, being a mum in ministry is a tough set of roles to juggle. Like most working mums, she is always looking for work-arounds to problems, but life is easier now than it was when she was in training.

"That really was difficult. Homelife was full-on. I was very pregnant with my second son when I was accepted for ordination and had my third during my second year of training. My husband was incredibly supportive and gave up his job to look after the boys, but after Reuben was born, I was reluctant to stop feeding him myself and he refused the bottle anyway. So baby Reuben became a fixture of college life, raising the bar on juggling.

Sermons had to be delivered with Reuben on his mother's hip and the college became accustomed to the sounds of his gurgling. "They were wonderful, and I like to think that Reuben added a richness to college life, but it was made more challenging by the fact that my husband had a heart condition and at a moment's notice I would have to leave to help him through an episode."

Not surprisingly the effort of managing so much led to Becca becoming ill with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, a debilitating condition that she still manages today. But being in Cornwall has proved to be a positive move for all of the family; they have thrived and so has Revd Becca.

"A fire was lit when I heard Bishop Tim deliver a rallying cry for Cornwall when I was in training. It was a gut reaction that told me that was where I was called to." She tested her response at the inauguration of Bishop Rachel in Gloucester

Cathedral, promising herself that if Bishop Tim was there, she would ask him for a job. Lo and behold, when turning to open a door, there he was. “I just said, ‘Hello I’m Becca and I would love to come and work in Cornwall!’”

Church life runs in Becca’s blood. Her parents were both Methodist ministers and although she felt the pull to ministry herself, she most definitely did not want to do what her parents did. “It wasn’t a reflection on them, I just didn’t want to conform.” She grew up around the Methodist tradition, flexing her leadership skills from an early age. Dissatisfied with the Christian fellowship at school, she started something new. At university she became vice-president of the Christian Union and then trained within the Methodist circuit, focusing on youth work. “I loved it. I went on to teaching and my heart has never left the joy of being with younger people.”

Rev'd Becca has recently started a cross-cluster group for young people, drawing them together from the six churches that she manages. “I was challenged by Bishop Philip to go where the return is, and what greater return is there than working with young people? You never know the seeds that you help to plant, but, especially with the current older demographic across our Cornish churches, those seeds are vital.”

So why the switch from Methodist to Anglican? “I describe myself as a scruffy catholic! There is so much that is good with the Methodist tradition, but for me it was the reverence and beauty of the Anglican Eucharist that lit the lightning rods.” It happened on one particular day when Becca was helping out at her local parish church. Fun and games around the rota left them minus a vicar for the service. As a Methodist preacher, Becca wasn’t able to give the Eucharist blessing. So, the vicar did it at the beginning, dashed off, leaving Becca to fashion and fill in the gaps. Standing at the altar rail, calling people forward to communion, the lightning struck. “That was the moment. I felt God saying, ‘Becca, you’re meant to be doing this,’ and I couldn’t ignore it anymore.”

Obediently she went forward and was accepted for ordination. She seriously considered the task of being heavily pregnant, managing two small children and taking on the intensive training. “To be honest, if I knew hard it was going to be, I probably wouldn’t have been brave enough - so I’m glad I didn’t know, as I’m really pleased to have made it through and to be doing what I’m doing.”

Although undeniably challenging, it is a testament to how far the Church of England has come. It was never an issue that she was a woman, or a young mother with a small baby on her hip. Becca also revelled in the companionship. “For the first time I found a peer group that was closer to my age and included women! On the Methodist circuit I was always with men who, although lovely, were considerably older and having a young family was a distant memory.”

Reflecting on women in ministry today, Becca has a few things to say. “Although we are in a state of flux, and probably will be for many years to come, it feels as we’ve all come a long way in terms of women being released. Freer to make decisions about our careers and ministry and to balance things better with being mums etc. But we still have a long way to go. And whilst I know I’ve been very

fortunate, particularly with not having to deal with negativity here, that isn't the case for so many of my colleagues.

“Too many have endured belittling comments. Even here, in my relatively protected bubble, there are moments in meetings that I get a sense of being overlooked or not heard. It's very difficult to pinpoint. If I try to articulate it, I know I'd quickly be seen as an angry feminist. “Sadly that everyday sexism is still there. I've almost become immune but long for the day when it isn't a thing any more, when we are just taken for who we are and what we contribute.

“At the same I recognise that we've come eons in 25 years. I really give thanks for all those women who have ploughed a furrow for us, all the deaconesses who went before even those who were ordained priest. I don't think I can really comprehend how much they went through and what they had to put up with. And it wasn't just men who gave them flack, it was often women too.

“My hope is that we all really listen to ourselves, recognise our preconceptions about the person before us and behave differently, behave better.” Niggles, not mountains, but nevertheless demeaning and not at all what Jesus did.

*Revd Becca will be talking more about what it means to be a woman in ministry at the Celebrating the Ministry of Women event, on September 26<sup>th</sup>, in Epiphany House, from 4-6pm.*