

LEAD ON

LEADERSHIP AND THE MENOPAUSE

BY JACKIE MANN

- I am a woman.
- I am 56 years old.
- I have been a disciple of Jesus for almost 40 years.
- I took on my first leadership role not long after.
- I have been in 'paid' Christian ministry for more than 30 years.
- I have been reading books on Christian leadership since the later 1980s and attending training conferences for probably the same amount of time.
- There is something that has, in recent years, had a huge impact on my discipleship and ministry, and yet I don't even need both hands to count the number of times it has been addressed.
- I am perimenopausal... I have been for a several years... and I am still approaching the menopause.
- I am not alone in this.

Before you read on, pause and recall a woman in your church – maybe a colleague, a specific individual, your wife. Seek to imagine her in glorious maturity in Christ. Now embrace that, unless Jesus returns, or she dies, the menopause will be part of her journey to that maturity. The Church and you as an individual will either help or hinder her as she walks that path. So, is there really anything you wouldn't explore because of your love for her in Jesus?

Why the Menopause?

With her, and many like her, in mind, why is this an important topic for all leaders, regardless of gender or age? Why can't it be left to the 'women's worker' (if you are fortunate enough to have one), or even better, for 'women of a certain age' to talk about outside of church? Three quick fire answers, then three slightly more in-depth ideas.

1. **50%+ of church are female** Every Sunday this is an observable reality to most of us. Statistically some

are now suggesting the ratio is nearer 2:1¹ We are called to encourage these women to know, love and follow Jesus.

2. **One out of one women will experience the menopause** (unless they die before its onset).
3. **It can have a significant impact mentally** (putting your keys in the fridge really isn't funny), **physically** (too many to politely mention, but some things sag, some things spread, some things ache, some things grow – where they shouldn't), **emotionally** (the unpredictable rollercoaster from rage to numbness), **relationally** (however stoic, it will impact friends, family and colleagues) and **spiritually** (navigating hot flushes in housegroup, forgetting names, depleted energy for all those meetings – stepping back means others assume you are losing your spiritual passion and God can seem absent in all the symptoms).



SOME BASIC FACTS – FOR INFORMATION BUT ALSO SO WE BEGIN TO GRASP THE REALITY.

- The perimenopause is a time of transition, when symptoms have begun but a woman is still menstruating. The average age this starts is 46². There are multiple symptoms. Lists vary depending on the resource you look at. 48³ symptoms is the highest I've come across. But none of them are exhaustive, and even the highest doesn't explore the impact spiritually. Why not see how many you can come up with, and then compare it to this fairly comprehensive list.
- A woman is said to be post-menopausal when she has not had a period for 12 consecutive months⁴. This is caused by declining hormone levels. The average age of the menopause is 51 years⁵. The average life expectancy for a woman in the UK is now 83. Do the maths, women now have potentially decades of post-menopause life, including the health implications of those declining hormones (e.g. osteoporosis, cardiovascular disease, dementia⁶).
- One in four⁷ women experience perimenopausal symptoms that can be described as severe. Only 2% have no symptoms at all⁸. 44% say that it impacts their ability to do their job, (and this can include those in ministry). One in ten have left a job because of symptoms and 14% have reduced their hours⁹. In a survey of peri-menopausal women for the Channel 5 programme 'Sex, Mind and the Menopause' 84% experienced disturbed sleep, 73% brain fog and 69% anxiety¹⁰. But 70% do not tell their employer¹¹ (so, let's be honest, if you are a male leader what makes you think a woman in your church would tell you?).
- Whilst on average symptoms last for around four years, 10% of women will experience them for up to 12 years¹². Just pause and imagine that for a moment.
- The caricature of a woman entering the menopause is probably a fifty something (with a fan!), yet Primary Ovarian Insufficiency (POI) is the term for a woman under 40 experiencing the menopause, whether the reason is unclear, the result of a medical condition, or medically induced. One in 100 women experience early onset menopause before they are 40, one in 1,000 before 30, and one in 20,000 before 20¹³. Think what it might be like for a teenager in your church to enter the menopause before her mum.

Addressing the Silence

IN OUR CULTURE AND COMMUNITIES

Perhaps we're not where we once were – the complete silence of our grandmother's generation, and more recently the comedy sketches about the 'change'. Thankfully the volume has been turned up on the issue over the past few years. Depending on your preferred channel and presenter we've had programmes on BBC1 (Kirsty Wark), Channel 4 (Cherry Healy) or Channel 5 (Davina McCall). Radio and Podcasts have not been left out, just Google 'Woman's Hour and the menopause'.¹⁴ But still three in four women in a recent survey felt it was a taboo topic, and 51% of women could only name three symptoms¹⁵.

Davina McCall, whilst now an 'evangelist' about the menopause and HRT, admits that, in her early forties, she was ignorant of the symptoms and lied both about her struggle and then taking HRT because of fear and shame. For women from some ethnic backgrounds there can be a practical reason for the silence. Quite simply there is no word for the menopause in their mother tongue. Imagine walking through an experience that is totally invisible to your heart language¹⁶.

IN OUR TEACHING AND DISCIPLESHIP

I have no idea how many sermons I've heard in the 39 years I've been a Christian (especially coming from a tradition of attending church twice on a Sunday), but they have been silent on what it means to be an embodied female follower of Jesus. Or perhaps it hasn't been totally silent, in reaction to current sexual trends in society there have been many references to female design for childbearing and nurture. Yet, in the shadows, there are issues that are still largely taboo: including how the realities that impact the female body (periods, PMS, menopause) influence a woman's spiritual life or capacity to serve.

In the silence, how are women to understand these realities for their own ministry? Or male leaders to



explore the implications for their female staff and congregation? In contexts where most of the teaching is done by men, they may not even consider this an area of application or (understandably) shy away from references. Where it is done by women, they may feel they would be abusing their position to speak out. So, we all remain quiet.

IN OUR LEADERSHIP MATERIAL

I love books. It was instinctive when I became a Christian to reach for a book so I would learn and grow. I started reading books on Christian leadership at university in the mid-1980s and I haven't stopped since. Hand on heart – I cannot think of a generic book on leadership that has ever assumed anything other than I would be facing the same things as a man.

I know 'times were different then', (oh, does that make me sound old – but let's own the reality that in the '80s there were fewer women in church ministry, and most leadership books were not written for a mixed audience). But, the scene has changed both in the local church and in wider networks, and so maybe in time the conversation will. Whilst some books now jump between the 'he/she' personal pronouns and use examples of female leaders, I've yet to find one mentioning how to lead whilst popping paracetamol for stomach cramps, dealing with PMT, or coping with perimenopause symptoms year after year, or how to raise any of these matters in a predominantly male environment, or advising male leaders on how to make space for female staff to have these conversations with them. Yet generic books don't tend to shy away from exploring good practice from a male perspective.

Owning the Complexity

Only as we explore the topic will we grasp the pastoral intricacies of being those called to shepherd women in our church families through this experience.

Whilst the majority will walk this path in their mid to late 40s, some will enter it far sooner. The earlier it

occurs the more likely it is to be accompanied by questions that carry into dating or marriage relationships, comparison with the life stages of peers and the grief of not conceiving one's own children.

For some POI will accompany the anguish of treatment for a serious illness, and therefore the 'weight' of it may initially be hidden. Consider for a moment what your church considers as a 'normal' trajectory for a young Christian woman and how this might be expressed, formally and informally, in the culture of the church. Would a twenty-something woman experiencing POI be able to connect with any of those aspirations?

In an age of so much fluidity in gender identity, we could also find ourselves walking alongside someone who identifies and lives as a man but still has a female reproductive system and is therefore experiencing the menopause.

Embrace the opportunities

If awareness of the menopause and its impact is slowly changing in the UK, what openings does this give us in the Church?

LET'S SET THE BAR HIGH AS EMPLOYERS OR SUPERVISORS

Too often as Christians we can lag behind secular employers in good practice and then play catch up only when the law demands. Consider the impact of hearing 'it is not required by law', 'it's a unique challenge' or 'it's dealt with by our sick policy' on a long-standing member of church staff who is a peri-menopausal woman and has raised the matter of menopause in the workplace to an all-male leadership team.

Now replace that scenario in your mind with the ambition of the church to be a shining light of what it looks like to enable women to thrive in this stage of life. This might mean that where diocesan policies exist, they are promoted and implemented, that a local church considers how work conditions and patterns can be



adjusted even before the need arises, or that as leaders we are secure enough to involve others as advocates where a female staff or team member needs to talk about this with someone other than us.

LET'S TALK ABOUT THE SOURCE OF OUR IDENTITY

There's a drumbeat at the moment that Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) is the answer to a menopausal woman getting her 'life back'. Davina McCall's book 'Menopausal' is subtitled 'The positive roadmap to your second spring'. It's about an identity built on productivity and lifestyle. It promotes HRT. Whilst this helps many women, it doesn't work for everyone, and is not even an option for some women.

What an opportunity we have to broaden the conversation. To journey with women in finding their true identity, one not based on productivity or lifestyle. I'm not crassly suggesting 'Jesus instead of HRT', but HRT alone is not the ultimate answer.

LET'S CONNECT WITH REAL ISSUES

I wonder if we live in boxes, the sacred rather than the secular, the soul over the body, so our teaching and discipleship primarily focus on addressing matters of the 'sacred and soul' which, by their very nature, are more generic. Of course, the problem with specific topics is just that – they are specific, they aren't experienced by every human being (although this one will be experienced by at least half).

But what if we broadened our understanding of what it means to be 'a church family', ensuring our teaching touches on real contexts for our discipleship and committing ourselves to learn about 'specifics' for the sake of others. I'm not married or a parent, but I've read and listened to material on both because I want to walk with those who are. Brothers (particularly), will you learn about and refer to the menopause because you want to walk with me and other women like me?

LET'S KEEP WOMEN GROWING AND SERVING

A woman's spiritual life and capacity to serve is not immune to the impact of any of the symptoms of the menopause. Her way of coping in the church may be exactly the same as in other areas of life – she feels she has to step back. Rather than being quick to judge an apparent lack of spiritual fervour or diminishing commitment, how about:

- Starting a conversation.
- Offering a language of lament amid change.
- Painting an image of Christ that will cheer her heart.
- Encouraging holiness empowered by the Holy Spirit.
- Embracing the riches of her wisdom and experience in service, even if she doesn't have the energy of a twenty-something-year-old.

LET'S BE PREPARED

If you are a woman in leadership, unless you've navigated this already, you are either in the midst of it or it's ahead of you. It's time to take on board the scouting motto, 'be prepared'. Find out all you can for your own sake and that of others. Please don't assume a GP will join up the dots. I saw three in quick succession in my late 40s. All of them defaulted to trying to find an anti-depressant that might help with a flatness and lack of motivation. They didn't work. None mentioned the 'm' word.

Covid-19 and workplace issues then delayed tackling the symptoms. Only after a minor meltdown in a supermarket in late 2020 did I join up the dots to being peri-menopausal and tell the doctor what was happening. Be your own advocate, and, if you can, find those you can journey with. The menopause is no respecter of ministry. It can have a huge impact, and for some it has meant changing their role or reducing their hours.

These are the reasons I have for a leader to engage with the menopause. It's not an exhaustive list. It's just my starting point. You may be able to think of more. But for now:

- Go back to the woman you thought of earlier, picture yourself cheering her on as she journeys through this to her full maturity in Christ.
- Breathe easy. You don't have to be an expert.
- But, be curious.
- And listen well.

SOME QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- How do you think a menopausal woman (of any age) experiences the culture of your church? Arrange a coffee with a few women to find out how their reality compares with your reflections. Probably best to ask ahead of time if they are happy to talk about it.
- Identify one or two opportunities that resonate with your context. What positive steps could you take in response?
- Spend some time lifting up to our Heavenly Father women known to you who will be discovering what it is to be a disciple and a leader through this season of life.

Footnotes

1. [Has the pandemic put men off church? \(churchtimes.co.uk\)](https://www.churchtimes.co.uk).
2. [BBC 'Too young to feel so old'](#).
3. [The 48 Symptoms of Menopause | GenM \(gen-m.com\)](#).
4. [Say 'menopause' three times a day, academics urged - BBC News](#).
5. [Say 'menopause' three times a day, academics urged - BBC News](#).
6. Menopausal, Davina McCall (HQ), pp60-61.
7. The Happy Menopause, Jackie Lynch (Watkins Publishing), chapter 1 p20, Menopause statistics.
8. [Menopause: Does diet play a part? Podcast](#).
9. [One in 10 women have quit their job because of menopause symptoms, survey reveals \(peoplemanagement.co.uk\)](#).
10. [Menopause and the Workplace Report \(fawcettsociety.org.uk\): Menopause symptoms p12](#).
11. [Employers urged to 'normalise' menopause in the workplace - BBC News](#).
12. [CIPD The Menopause at work: A guide for people professionals](#).
13. The Happy Menopause, Jackie Lynch (Watkins Publishing), chapter 1 p17.
14. [BBC Radio 4 - Woman's Hour, The Menopause](#).
15. [Menopause Research - The Invisibility Report | GenM \(gen-m.com\)](#).
16. Menopausal, Davina McCall (HQ), p76 quoting Dr Nighat Arif (NHS GP).