

The Fraternal

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A Place in the Sun — Towards a liberation theology for Britain?

It was Karl Barth, scathing as ever about the deficiencies of much 19th century theology, who wrote of theology's attempt to secure for itself 'a place in the sun'. By this he intended, somewhat patronisingly, to dismiss theology's attempt to justify its own existence by reference to rationalism and scientific method. Theo Witvliet, lecturer in Ecumenism in the Amsterdam University theological faculty, has coined this phrase as the title for his masterly, if highly condensed, summary of 20th century liberation theology. He, though, is neither scathing nor patronising in describing this particular 20th century theological attempt to justify theology's existence. Far from it. His "guidebook ... midway between a survey and an interpretation" ¹ makes stimulating reading.

Liberation theology, he writes, is "a new way of doing theology ... concerned with the way theology can have a liberating function (and) can function in a **praxis** of liberation".² Theology cannot be neutral. The theologian must be committed to a lifestyle of solidarity with the poor and the oppressed and involvement in action with them".³

Liberation theology. What images, prejudices, fears and passions the concept can give rise to. Dangerous "lefties" masquerading as believers. Peasants with a gun in one hand and the catechism in the other. Brave martyrs like Archbishop Romero. Latin American death squads hunting down Bible-owners. Sandinista priests putting country before Pope. An outspoken Tutu or a Boesak. A theology which has collapsed totally into social concern and action or worse, into party-politics. A North-Eastern Bishop who is politically and doctrinally suspect OR who is courageously honest and in genuine solidarity with a Britain our churches scarcely touch. One can learn much about a person's character, beliefs and voting habits just from their first responses to the concept of a theology for liberation.

John Bowden and the SCM have, again, done theology good service by discovering, recognising, clearly translating and publishing Witvliet's fine book. **A Place in the Sun** is deceptively small, shockingly annotated, yet eminently readable. Its contents traverse the continents with ease. American Black theology, and S African, are overviewed. The centuries-old struggle against slavery, racism and apartheid goes on. "Black theology is an attempt to understand the situation of black people, the victim of centuries of racism, in the light and under the judgement of God's Word in Jesus Christ".⁴ He analyses Caribbean theology and combines this with a powerful plea to listen to Rastafarianism with its contempt for society's established culture and values: the "Babylon" system. He prizes the burgeoning numerical and spiritual strength of African theology and Christianity. His estimate is that already, 45% of Africa at least is Christian. Theology must — he records — share in the fight against forced repatriation, under-development, poverty, destitution, hunger and sickness. Turning to Asia, he introduces a quite remarkable Korean theology: minjung theology. 'The minjung is present where there is talk of social and cultural alienation, economic exploitation and political oppression Workers and peasants are minjung when they are exploited, when their

needs and desires are ignored and they are crushed by the ruling powers'.⁵
(David Kwang-sun Suh).

Predictably, it is as Witvliet covers the Latin American scene, though, that the imagination and, hopefully, the liberation vision are fully caught. As he acknowledges, Latin American theologians have been "foremost in recognising and describing the decisive methodology and hermeneutical implications of this new way of doing theology".⁶ Usually, he points out, the theology of liberation in Latin America sprang from pastoral work. It was forged amidst grinding poverty, squalor, illiteracy and destitution; amidst violent landowners backed up by knuckle-dusters and machine guns. Murder, rape, assault, torture, exploitation, oppression, corruption, injustice gave it birth. In the words of Gustavo Gutiérrez: '... the struggle for a just society is in its own right very much a part of salvation history'.⁷ At least 1000 priests and religious have been martyred in the past ten years, he reminds us. Whole groups have been martyred as "Communists" for owning a Bible. With Jon Sobrino he sees Calvary in "so many outrages to His Body and Blood among us ... the corpses piled up, here in our own land and throughout the world".⁸ Liberation theology is, we are told, no comfortable armchair resort in Latin America. The 'place in the sun' may be only that of the mutilated corpse by the roadside.

Such then is the vast sweep of Witvliet's introduction. My first reaction to liberation theology was, whilst broadly sympathising, to view it as politics and revolution with a veneer of Christianity. I also considered its biblical base to be superficial. Reading and considering Witvliet's work has changed my mind. Though he, himself, neglects to draw out liberation theology's biblical and doctrinal foundation, save implicitly, are not those foundations there all the same?

In the liberation of the Exodus slaves? In the Torah's humane and compassionate provisions for the stranger, the unfortunate, the weak and the poor? In the 'Be comforted' of Isaiah and the diatribes of Amos? In the social concern of the Proverbs and the pleas of the Psalms?. In the manifesto of the Magnificat and Luke 4? In the "sheep and goats" of Matthew 25? And, supremely, in the agony, blood, tears and anguish of the Incarnation, the Crucifixion and Liberation Supreme, the Resurrection? Can there be a much clearer biblical and doctrinal mandate than this? In David Sheppard's now very familiar words: 'I believe that there is a divine bias to the disadvantaged and that the Church needs to be much more faithful in reflecting it'.⁹

Towards a liberation theology for Britain? One misses in Witvliet any conclusion (or even hints) on the implication of liberation theology for the European or Dutch scene. The book tantalizes and could have been fuller. Gutiérrez wrote '... all the political theologies, the theologies of hope, of revolution and of liberation are not worth one act of genuine solidarity with exploited social classes!'¹⁰ Witvliet insists that theology must never lose sight of "marginalized people, of their struggle for the most basic human rights, and the presence of the crucified and risen Messiah in their midst."¹¹ In Latin America, the theology of liberation sprang, as we have seen, from pastoral work. And in Britain? In Cowley?

Perhaps (and these descriptions and reflections are all undergirded by that word) something of a liberation theology for Britain can be glimpsed in local pastoral work? Among the elderly, in hospitals, in racial integration, in the factory, in Church growth, worship and conversions? To illustrate:

The elderly. A pensioner cold, tears in her eyes, confessing how she longed to die before the next quarter's bills came in. Another, trapped in a home, bravely coping, while waiting for the "emergency" which would mean "they" would then, and only then, let her into a "home". A widow struggling to pay a £500 funeral bill, helped only by a shameful £30 grant. Two pensioners on the same street divided by a District Council boundary — one with an excellent bus pass for travel, the other with only a few soon-spent tokens. Thousands living on State pensions woefully short of the sort of income level and social wage managed by other EEC States. A week's pension a quarter going on standing charges which hit many OAPs disproportionately hard. Sub Post Offices closing. Health visiting for the elderly phased out. With my Deacons' full support I have had the privilege to help found and develop a Pensioners' Rights Action Group here in Oxfordshire. Opportunities to speak out for the elderly have come — in the press, on local Radio, and at clubs and meetings. The Risen Christ has called us to this. Of that I am sure.

The National Health Service. Hospital visiting made clear to me some of the financial restraints on the NHS. My members were being rushed out of hospital (in my judgement, prematurely), so desperate was the need for (scarce) beds. A local hospital for brain-damaged patients — a worshipper worked there — was threatened with cuts in numbers. Waiting lists, especially for long-term geriatric patients, grew. Children's physiotherapists, chiropodists, school nurses, were being reduced. It was the Church meeting, influenced by a Community Health Council speaker to the Deacons' meeting, which **insisted** on a petition to Number 10, to the Department of Health, to local MPs, to the OAHA and to the local and national media. We received significant media coverage. Later a larger, county-wide petition, begun by Churches, eventually reversed some of these cutbacks.

Racial integration. The things you can say when you're fresh from College and preaching with a view! 'Why is this Church SO white?' I challenged — and still they called me. Praise God, one of the thrills of our years at John Bunyan, Cowley, has been to see an elderly, white Church with just one black worshipper, become an increasingly multi-racial, all-age Christian community. Hard, hard pastoral work welcomed the first three black members. The Church's possible racism, and mine, were being tested. Gorgeous West Indian hospitality. Friends telling friends. A husband, then his wife, converted. A black Deacon was elected, then a second — pray God the time will come when we scarcely notice!

Most recently a whole Christian Asian family has come into membership. I will never forget the thrill of blessing Parveen's engagement and the celebrations in our Church rooms afterwards. Or their poignant comment 'we hope joining will help us to be accepted in the community more'. Or,

again, supporting a black member whose son was arrested early one morning (and the whole, good, family suspected and traumatised) until he was released without, at first, an apology. It was a case of mistaken identity — he was young, black, ('they all look the same') and in the wrong place at the wrong time. After my mediating between family and police — with a clear desire to conciliate on both sides — a largely acceptable apology was received from the Chief Superintendent.

The factory. There is much more to Cowley than Austin Rover but it remains at the heart of the community here. Indeed, it has done since the early 1900s. Perhaps a third of our membership have — in the present or the past — direct links with "the Works", ie themselves or a close member of their family working there. If you have not been inside 'BL', heard the noise, seen the fast and furious pace of the car bodies passing through, marvelled at the robotics, seen and counselled the tiredness and strain on so many faces, you won't understand. Nor will you if you've not listened to workers speaking of the appalling class differentials, eg not pension, illness and holiday arrangements; of failures in communication and basic rules of dignity between (some) managers (some) unionists and (some) workers. Perhaps you still remember the 1983 'washing-up' dispute? Perhaps, with others, you dismissed it as work-shy workers wanting to be paid for time at the sink? How differently it all read here in Cowley as you listened. The 'line' had been, in a previous agreement, already speeded up to 'earn' this extra clean-up time. Slip-men were being removed but not replaced (ie reliefs for sickness, toilet, dentist, accidents), thus exacerbating both pace and pressure. To many workers it was 'them' fighting policy battles way up there about Cowley's future, without reference to 'us'. Five years' tension had bubbled up into what they called 'the big one'. Many felt it was now or never to regain dignity, teach management a lesson, win. And yes ... management needs liberating too.

Conversion. Liberation indeed! New creation. New birth. Aimless, empty lives reclaimed and redirected. Spiritual reality contacted. Lives changing. A superficial materialism transformed by a living faith in the Risen Christ. Bunyan's muck-raker seizing instead the celestial crown. A husband converted at a Mission and his one-time 'let him make a fool of himself' wife, not long after being baptised herself.

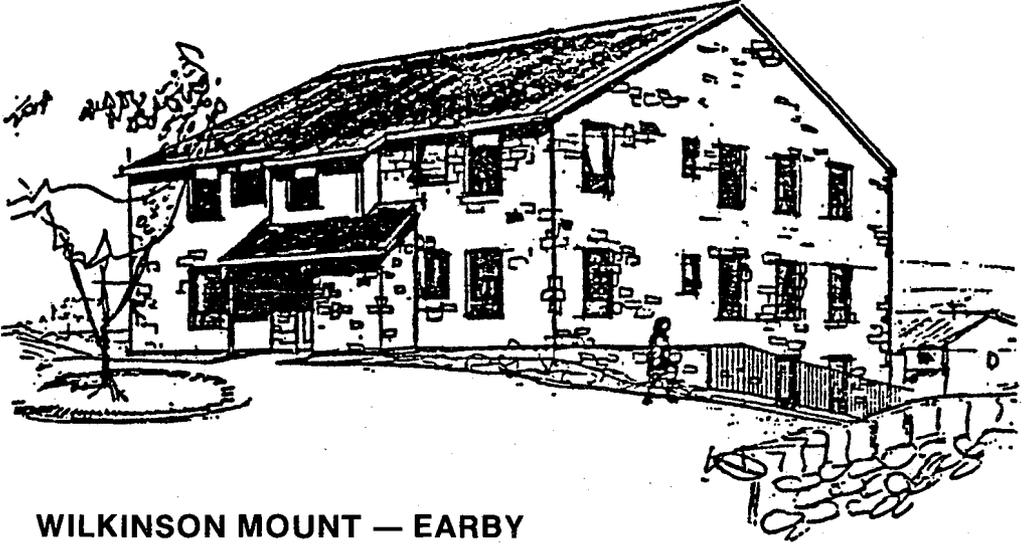
A young couple longing for Christ but not knowing His Name, ripe to be gently midwifed through the faith. The Church cleaner helped through an eye operation, overwhelmed by the Church's love, now a baptised member. A pensioner, empty and aching for faith, glowingly baptised. The Church growth at Cowley, under God has been largely by restoration (the lapsed recommitting their lives) and conversions. The Liberating Christ — again — surely, at work.

How much more could be included here? commitment to the Peace cause and the inter-connected Third World needs. A Deacons' meeting discussion on unemployment and its traumas. Renewed worship — itself liberated then liberating — and with so much still to learn.

Towards a liberation theology for Britain? Theological praxis? Community and Pastoral care as theological action? A theology which cares,



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challenges and changes? The liberating Christ at work among the elderly, in the NHS, in racial integration, in the factory and its workforce. In Church growth, in conversions? As I say — perhaps. And among you?

Michael I. Bochenski

Notes

1. Theo Witvliet (SCM 1985) *A Place in the Sun* p.(ix) An introduction to Liberation Theology in the Third World.
2. *ibid* p.26
3. *ibid* p.27
4. *ibid* p.72
5. Quoted *ibid* p.163
6. *ibid* p.118
7. Quoted *ibid* p.128
8. Quoted *ibid* p.136
9. Sheppard D. *Built as a City*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1983, p.16.
10. Quoted Witvliet p.127
11. *ibid* p.22

The Spirit of Dogmatism

The following words are attributed to a postwar Christian leader: “We have the assurance of our position. We have the certainty of the possession of truth. We have the answers to all the questions.” That is the kind of dogmatism I wish to consider in this article (hoping that the article does not turn out to be dogmatic itself!). The recent furore over the Bishop of Durham suggests that dogmatism may be widespread.

Robert Runcie, at his enthronement in 1980, spoke of his desire to give “a firm lead against rigid thinking, a judging temper of mind, the disposition to over-simplify difficult and complex problems.” People with strong personal convictions, such as Christians, are prone to the attitudes described there.

Dogmatism is present, it seems to me, when we:

‘over-simplify complex problems’;
reduce reality to a set of words that are then
imposed on other people;
claim more certainty than can be justified;
present our point of view as alone being valid;
take our experience as the norm for everybody, and
belittle other people’s point of view or experience.

Paul Tournier has written that “the spirit of dogmatism ossifies thought and sterilises life.” It is, he argues, “a grave and widespread disease, and the source of all spiritual tyrannies — and spiritual tyranny is the worst poison of the mind.” Alec Vidler has said bluntly, “Anyone who is disposed to be an ostrich may be as dogmatic as he pleases!”

Why are we dogmatic? I say ‘we’, rather than ‘they’ or ‘you’, because I know what happens to my tolerance when I see Margaret Thatcher on the box!

Temperament and upbringing must have a lot to do with this. We also know that the enthusiasm of one newly converted to a particular point of

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view can lead to a dismissal of what has been left behind.

How far do fear and insecurity come into the picture? I may conceal a lack of self-confidence behind an outward show of strength of conviction. If I identify myself with my opinions, then any disagreement with my opinions feels to me like an attack on me as a person. I must defend myself against attack, by affirming my opinions all the more forcefully, and by rejecting all alternatives. Issues of truth are far less significant in the process than the issue of my personality and self-esteem.

But what am I going to put in the place of dogmatism? A vague woolly-mindedness? by no means!

I do not deny that we must, for example:

- search for the most adequate understanding and expression of belief;
- choose between alternative views, on the basis that some are a better approximation to reality than others, and that some may actually be wrong, or un-Christian;
- reject whatever clearly contradicts the Gospel, e.g. racism or injustice.

But what is going too far is for us to be dogmatic about things that are not clearcut, to which there are legitimate alternatives, where the 'truth' cannot be definitively stated. After all, as Charles Davis writes, "Mystery is the presence of God. Man cannot with truth locate that presence. God is not beyond or outside the world; he is not above or below; he is neither within

nor without. He is an undefined presence, which imposes itself upon man's experience without uncovering the secret of Divine Being."

Tolerance, as an alternative to dogmatism and confrontation, may not seem popular at present, but I am encouraged to see it described by Paul Tournier as "not moral cowardice", but as "Christian humility, faith and love."

Discussion of the Bible can bring out the dogmatic streak in many Christians. On the one hand, there is the point of view represented in these words: "The Biblical authors were led by the Holy Spirit so as to record the word of God infallibly." That leads to a conviction of the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible. It is not a stance that I can identify with, as I find it fraught with inconsistencies and intellectual difficulties. But what is more relevant to this article is the arrogance with which many fundamentalists present their point of view as the only truly Christian one.

Another option is to see the Bible as, they say, 'Word of God in words of men'. Hans Küng writes, "The Scriptures are the human testimonies of divine revelation, in which the humanity, independence and historicity of the human authors always remain intact ... My Faith is not based on Scripture. It is not the book as such, but God himself in Jesus who is the ground of my faith. The truth of Scripture reaches us without any violence through the humanity, historicity and frailty of the human authors."

This leads Küng to certain conclusions about the Bible as the word of God:

it is not simply God's word, for it is
first of all man's word, the word of
quite definite individuals;
it does not simply contain God's word, as
if some propositions are God's word, while
others are man's;
it becomes God's word, for anyone who "submits
trustfully to its testimony and so to the
God revealed in it."

Neither of these two contrasted views, nor any in-between, is entitled to claim to be self-evidently true (whatever that might mean!). Each has a right to be heard and to be taken seriously, to be respected while being subjected to criticism. Our attempts to wrestle with the significance of the Bible are helped neither by the dogmatic claims of the fundamentalist, nor by the condescending dogmatism of those who feel they have escaped from the naivete of fundamentalism.

In the end, our conflicting theories about inspiration and authorship count far less than our readiness to respond to the God who encounters us in the Bible. To quote once again from Hans Küng: "The question whether and how the Bible is inspired word is far less important than the question of how a man allows himself to be inspired by its word" (yet more sexism?).

I would rather see someone let his life-style be shaped by the Bible —whatever be his theories about it — than someone else who is coldly orthodox and unimpeachable be a living contradiction of the Bible.

Take David Jenkins, for example (yes — him again!). He is no fundamentalist, of course, but he appears to take the Bible with the utmost seriousness, writing, in **Living with Questions**, that we must seek “a practical way of bringing together what is given in the Bible and the Christian tradition with what is given in the challenge of the situation today, so that God may be heard and obeyed.”

We could all swap our horror stories of the traumatic effects of another kind of dogmatism, namely the intolerance and feelings of superiority shown to us lesser mortals by some of those who speak of renewal, and who engage in controversy concerning tongues, authority or worship.

We know that many ordinary members of congregations have been made to feel second class citizens, and have been deeply hurt by the attitudes and innuendos of people who have, for example, elevated speaking in tongues to the status of a sure sign of Christian maturity. It has all stretched to the limit the capacity of hurt people to forgive.

I accepted the ministry at Stroud three years ago, knowing of the split suffered by the congregation two years previously. Much of the pain was still easy to see. But if I was to have any hope of exercising a ministry of reconciliation — and that has always been my desire — then it was no use me simply heaping coals of fire on the ‘charismatics’. For they are not the only people who are intolerant and dogmatic. Others of us, too, contribute to division by our fear and prejudice, by our resistance to the very possibility of change. We can all be guilty of showing a lack of understanding and respect for fellow-Christians.

As so often, we start from our own experience — especially if that has seemed exciting and liberating for us — and try to impose it on everyone else. It is not dogmatism in the cause of truth, but dogmatism in the cause of our own experience! It would be so much healthier to see that charismatic experience of one particular kind — however precious — is one small part of the total spectrum of Christian spirituality.

It is refreshing to find people whose vivid experience of the Spirit does not lead them into intolerance, people like Cardinal Suenens. Though a persuasive advocate of spiritual renewal, he comments that “Elitism would be fatal; there are no ‘super-Christians’.”

Michael Cassidy could not be accused of any lack of enthusiasm for the renewal movement. He understands some of the frustrations which lead to the formation of separatist fellowships or house churches, but feels that division in the cause of renewal is “no more feasible than serving the parts of the body to improve its health.” All sections of the Church need each other, if we are to glimpse the full-orbed truth of the whole gospel of Christ. More personally, he comments that “a deeper appreciation of the Spirit’s work has not provided any shortcut to spiritual maturity.”

I was struck by Cassidy’s quotations from two other Christian writers, firstly Jonathan Edwards: “The spiritually proud person is apt to find fault with other saints, that they are low in grace; and to be much in observance of how cold and dead they are.” The eminently humble person, by contrast, “will as much as possible shun all appearances of superiority.”

The other author is Richard Lovelace: “Pride can move awakened

believers to censorious attacks on other Christians, a lack of meekness in rebuking those who really need it, and a hair-trigger readiness to separate from those less holy or less orthodox."

The lesson I take from all this is that dogmatism is neither necessary nor helpful, either on the part of 'charismatics', or of the rest of us.

Being a minister opens up many opportunities for dogmatism. It may take the form of what has been called 'pastoral paranoia' — we refuse to listen to criticism, feeling threatened whenever anyone (including our wives!) disagrees with us or initiates new ideas. It is our insecurity coming through again, of course. We become negative, and critical of 'our people' (whose people?), impatient with them, forgetting that many of them, in their own field, hold highly responsible and creative posts. But we are tempted to see ourselves as the experts, the source of all wisdom, ideas, vision.

I exaggerate, of course. Or do I? How often have we all heard — and joined in — the dinner table conversations at ministers' conferences? 'My people this — my people that — the trouble I have with my organist/choir/-B.B. Captain/treasurer.' And some of our problems are real! But when do we ever stop, as we sit round the table, and say, 'I myself am the problem. I am no better than any other member of the church. I, no less than they, am lacking in vision, zeal and love?' "It does no harm to place yourself below all others, but it does the utmost harm to place yourself above even one other" (Thomas a Kempis).

How can we go on ministering with any love and integrity when we have taken to constant criticism and disillusionment? Is it not better to give thanks daily for the congregation where we believed (once, at any rate) God had placed us?

Bonhoeffer's words in **Life Together** haunt me. "A pastor should not complain about his congregation, certainly never to other people, but also not to God. A congregation has not been entrusted to him in order that he should become its accuser before God and men." We are in danger of judging the congregation by comparison with some 'dream community' of our own making. "He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter."

Commenting on Luke 9.46 ('There arose a reasoning among them, which of them should be the greatest'), Bonhoeffer wrote "Cease from constantly scrutinising the other person, judging him, condemning him ... Strong and weak, wise and foolish, gifted or ungifted, pious or impious, the diverse individuals in the community are no longer incentives for talking and judging and condemning. They are rather cause for rejoicing in one another and serving one another."

Perhaps we could consider this: do we only attend speakers, and read books, with which we already know we shall agree? Have I the courage and humility to read a book by, for example, one of those fundamentalists with whom I have already confessed I disagree, and actually expect God to speak to me through it? "The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice" (Proverbs 12.15).

What I (mistakenly) thought was an innocent letter to the 'Missionary Herald', concerned with Third World liturgies, and the attitudes enshrined

in some of our missionary hymns, brought to light another area in which many Christians are dogmatic. I mean our attitude to men and women of other religions.

I still stand by what I wrote in that, and a follow-up letter. To save the effort of too much fresh thought, I shall quote those letters here.

"My original letter in no way denied that Jesus is 'The Way, the truth and the life'. Nor did I suggest that all religions are equally valid ways of access to God." (My original letter spoke of "appreciation of other world religions in their richness, rather than dismissing them").

"But does the fact that I am a committed Christian require that I reject everyone else's point of view as 'utterly bankrupt'? As Christians, we expect our witness to be heard and our point of view respected. Can we not extend the same courtesy to others? Otherwise, we give the clear impression of being ready to talk, but not to listen!

"... I am left thinking this — can religions which have bred the likes of Gandhi and Tagore, Martin Buber and Lionel Blue, be entirely bad?

"... It is not a case of agreeing with, or espousing the beliefs of others, but rather of respecting them, and being willing to see the good in them.

"... Here is our world, dying from poverty, starvation and war. Isn't this a time for mutual understanding and respect?"

We belong to a pluralist society in a pluralist world. We know more about one another than ever before. Today's teenagers learn more at school about the world's religions than most of us have ever had chance to learn. We see each other's strengths and weaknesses. But Hans Küng argues that some attitudes are no longer acceptable: for example, the arrogant domination of a religion claiming an exclusive mission and despising freedom; a narrow-minded, conceited, exclusive particularism which condemns the other religions **in toto**; the syncretistic mingling of all religions, however much they contradict one another.

David Brown, late Bishop of Guildford, offers an alternative to dogmatism. In the building of a harmonious world-community, "we need the rich diversity of religious experience to inspire and to challenge us." He welcomes this diversity, for "each one illuminates a different facet in the relationship of God with his creation." Faith in Jesus Christ should not deter Christians from "the task of understanding other religions, listening to their testimonies about the living God, and entering into dialogue with their neighbours who practise them."

David Brown worked as a missionary in the Sudan, and studied under Muslim teachers in Egypt. He finally states two obligations for Christians. One is "to make Christ known as Lord and Saviour, and to invite others to become his disciples." The other is "to listen with sympathy to what others have to say about God's grace as it has become known to them."

Once again, there is an alternative to dogmatism, an alternative which is warmer, humbler and richer than intolerance.

This article has been written out of impatience with all dogmatism — whoever's dogmatism it happens to be. I have tried to give thought to a few of the areas in which dogmatism operates, and to suggest the alternative of tolerance and respect.

So much Christian debate is carried on in an acrimonious atmosphere, between inflexible people whose minds are already made up. It goes on between people so wedded to their own views and experience that they are unwilling to try to appreciate anyone else's. But, as Paul Tournier writes, "Men are infinitely diverse. They travel along many different roads. There is always something new to be learned from each one, so long as one retains the spirit of seeking."

One symptom of dogmatism is our eagerness to attach labels to others, in order to keep them at a safe distance, and avoid actually meeting. We call one another 'conservative' or 'radical', 'liberal' or 'charismatic'. The labels do little justice to real-live people. But arrogant narrow-mindedness from one side is met by supercilious dismissal from the other, and no real meeting of minds and personalities takes place.

I look back on some aspects of my own teenage Christianity with pleasure, but on others with distaste — the days when I knew it all, and was scornful of others with whom I disagreed. It was all so cut-and-dried, as it usually is at that age. But twenty years later, my certainties become fewer in number. (Mind you, Bishop Lightfoot said, "I find that my faith suffers nothing by leaving a thousand questions open, so long as I am convinced on two or three main lines").

I feel inclined to say of those days, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways" (1 Corinthians 13.11). But is it actually a sign of maturity, or a decline in faith?

Paul Tournier sums it all up really: "As soon as one believes one possesses the truth, and encases it in a system, one shuts out other horizons" — our mind is "frozen in a partisan attitude which obstructs the evolution of its life."

"Be humble always and gentle, and patient too. Be forbearing with one another and charitable. Spare no effort to make fast with bonds of peace the unity which the Spirit gives ... Be generous to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4.2, 3, 32).

"Everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God, but the unloving know nothing of God. For God is love" (1 John 4.7-8).

"When you put your own potential
and insights at the service of your brothers,
your insight will grow stronger and richer,
and together you will create that spaciousness
which finds room for everyone
Make the effort of listening to the other man
and of understanding him ...
Speak in such a way
that you can still hear what the other is saying,
and that he will still be ready to hear you."

(from 'Rule for a New Brother').

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In 1905 we were founded to serve the denomination by Baptists prepared to subscribe the necessary capital. The majority of the shareholding is now owned by the Baptist Associations. We concentrate on the insurance needs of Baptist Churches and members.

After expenses and claims have been met, the small fixed dividends paid and the necessary funds transferred to reserves to maintain the Company's strength, surplus profits are devoted only to Baptist Causes. The premiums we charge for the insurance and service we provide compare more than favourably with the insurance market as a whole.

We usually achieve a modest profit each year. This is important in the long-term interests of the Company and its clients. Quite apart from the support we give to the denomination, no business can survive indefinitely by making losses.

Of course we are not without competitors for the insurance of our Churches. Occasionally Churches leave us and happily some return after a year or two. It is interesting to see that an Insurer who has been prepared to charge lower rates to secure Church business is warning of increased premiums in the face of an operating loss.

We cannot rule out the need to make occasional adjustments of premium to recognise increased claims for arson, theft, vandalism etc, but our aim is to maintain a steady pricing policy. This is consistent with our object of remaining as long as the denomination needs us "Your Company for your insurance".

**M.E. PURVER
General Manager**

Books quoted in this article:

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David Brown: **All Their Splendour** (Fount).
Michael Cassidy: **Bursting the Wineskins** (Hodder).
David Jenkins: **Living with Questions** (SCM).
Hans Küng: **On Being a Christian** (Fount).
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Alec Vidler: **Christian Belief** (SCM).

B. Vendy

A Career in the Ministry

What follows is relatively easily dismissed as a ragbag of concerns not to mention prejudices with no very clear focus. If it has one it is my conviction that we should create a career structure for the Baptist ministry offering properly qualified people the prospect of progressing from lesser to greater responsibilities. It might have existed in the past; that is for the historian to say. It exists in what I imagine the past was like, when, invariably, a man was called first to a small church and moved on to medium sized and larger ones earning a little more money and gathering greater prestige as he went. That situation does not exist now. The most striking evidence I can offer is that over and over again comparatively young people get the top jobs. Whether it be the bigger churches or leading posts in colleges (even one or two Superintendents look young) you can make it by your mid 30's. In many ways such youthful contributions are good for the denomination, in other ways bad, especially for the people concerned. They are unlikely to refuse attractive and challenging opportunities when offered at an early age, but they will soon suspect that it represents too much too soon. After a decent period of service they realise there is nowhere to go except to stay put, or move sideways if they are allowed to, or look outside the denomination for another job. They are frustrated and their talents are lost.

A number of unworthy sentiments will have been noted already. We should surely be glad to release people from the denomination for services to the wider church? I agree but I would rather do so out of an abundance of talent (to which I shall return) not a shortage where we can ill-afford to lose what we've got; and for better reasons than that they have nowhere else to go. Even more objectionable is surely any talk of a 'career' and getting on, and looking forward to promotion; and then there is the quite shocking suggestion that jobs in colleges or pastorates of big churches are higher up some sort of scale. Here we must at least avoid cant and exploit the realism

as well as the idealism of our faith. There will always be visions and examples of humble and contented service to put our less admirable aspirations into perspective. We must thank God for them and allow them to judge us. On the other hand most of us are far from perfect. We need a carrot or two in the form of prospects. We want opportunities to realise more of our potential. We look for the refreshment of new tasks instead of for too long trying to keep our approach to old tasks fresh. We need to flex our muscles and shoulder greater responsibility. We want, and I think quite properly, fulfilment as human beings. It may be far wiser to respond to these desirable and not so desirable traits and get the best out of us than to dismiss them in a rather high-minded manner and leave us dispirited and rather fed-up.

In any case the career structure I have in mind is not a matter of 'progressing' from smaller to larger churches, and let it be said in case it needs saying, does not have significant salary differentials as a necessary feature, though once again honesty and realism may not wish to rule them out. My career structure is rooted in a wider variety of jobs. In some cases examples already exist.

Before talking about this variety in a little more detail it will be as well to make clear what all ordained ministers in my judgement have in common. At the core of their professional competence (a 'professional' is someone of whom we can properly expect a measure of competence in a definable area) lies an awareness of the immense riches contained in the Christian community as it stretches back in history to the churches of the New Testament period and out across the world church. I like to call it "the common wealth of Christianity". It is this wealth they must not only know about but know how to make available to the church, for us mainly the local church, to nourish its life. The minister enables the church to be the church not primarily by high-profile leadership bending it to the minister's will, nor by exercising a multitude of practical skills, nor by making up the church's mind for it, but by constantly introducing and opening up to it the vast resources of faith, insight, and experience possessed by the universal church, and encouraging it to draw on those resources to enlarge its own heart and mind and spirit and give quality and shape to its life. Any ordained minister unable or unprepared to do that should be out of a job, and the narrowness and poverty of much present church life is due in no small measure, not to unmotivated or lazy or unworthy ministers but to ministers who are incompetent in the primary sense.

If however that is the invariable core, it can and needs to be complemented by variety. There is the same professional competence. There are many jobs. Three interlocking pictures come to mind. First, in an Association as we know ministers, maybe rooted in one local church, can make their talents more widely available, as evangelists, educationalists, liturgists, or people well-informed in particular areas of social concern and so on. Perhaps we should say the Association can make their talents available by appointing, commending and using them. Second, let us take a smaller area, not unlike an Anglican deanery or a Methodist circuit, containing a number of congregations of different sizes. Within such an area there could be a team of ministers with more senior and junior members, a

leader, and one or two ordinands placed there during training. Following the association model, these ministers could of course complement each other's contributions over and above the 'core-curriculum' of their ministry. Third a college (or some other church institution dealing for example with lay training, probationary and in-service training) will need not only placements for its students but variety within its staff. Here the traditional subject areas will be relevant but not sufficient. Teachers in Biblical studies, in history, in systematic theology and the like will be needed. Those with inter-disciplinary skills will be needed even more. And as learning engages increasingly with practice the institution will need tutors in the field able to supervise placements, help people to learn by doing and to assess and reflect theologically on practice. Such field workers might be called 'tutor-practitioners' all the better as tutors for remaining on the job.

I have referred sketchily, to three interlocking pictures. Elements of them exist already as do other jobs I have not mentioned; others do not exist and would need to be created. It should be noted that although I have not stopped to do so, they can all be justified for their own sake, not merely for the sake of providing ministers with careers; nevertheless as the list grows it becomes easier to imagine 'careers' or routes through a minister's working life which have about them a sense of steady progression and growing responsibility and fulfilment and are less prone to rapid advances onto sticky plateaus. Mary for instance starts out as a very junior member of a team. After six years she takes on a church by herself. Later she becomes a more senior member of a team and whilst there completes her qualifications as a specialist in adult education. After twenty-six years in the ministry she is invited to be an Association minister or Superintendent. John stays on in college for three years doing some teaching and research. Afterwards in his second pastorate he begins to supervise students on placement and qualifies as a tutor-practitioner. In his mid-forties he is appointed as a full-time member of college staff but after ten years finally becomes leader of a large urban team which provides among other things an excellent training ground for ordinands. So we could multiply examples, never ruling out or dishonouring those who want nothing more nor less than a succession of satisfying pastorates in unremarkable places.

Something more however is required than the possibility of progressive routes through life, and that is a structure. It seems to me it needs at least three inter-related elements. The first is training. Initial training for ministry will be concerned mainly with the area of competence which all ministers have in common, though even that cannot be left to take care of itself once initial training is over. Continuing training is required. When it comes to the more varied opportunities of a career in the ministry, training of one kind or another will be called for at every stage whether it be in specialist skills or special areas of knowledge and understanding, or as a supervisor or tutor or team leader. The relevant training opportunities would need to be made available, or certainly co-ordinated, a job no doubt for the Secretary for Ministry. The second element, linked closely to training, is standards. Amateurishness would be treated with scepticism. Jobs would be carefully defined. There would be qualifications involving skill and knowledge and

experience as well as qualities of character. People would not be given jobs unless they came up to standard, or be encouraged to keep them unless standards were maintained. The third element in the structure would be oversight, exercised by Superintendents and those, in relation to probationers, maybe, trained and appointed to act on their behalf. Such oversight on a regular basis, as much a part of what it means to be accredited as the superannuation scheme, would help ministers in the task of self-assessment. How well is the present job being done? How long should I go on doing it? What help and training is required to maintain standards? Oversight would also care about self-fulfilment. What have I learned about myself and my abilities and what does that suggest about the route and the next steps to take?

I described the three elements in the structure as inter-related. In-service training for example would prove more attractive linked to job prospects than it does now where, devoid of any immediate purpose, it appears as worthy but un compelling.

In my view such a career structure would in time considerably improve morale. More important for the sake of the church and the Kingdom it would improve standards. It is always difficult to comment adversely on standards without sounding arrogant or rude or both, or indulging in the kind of romantic nonsense that can't conceive of the present as being anything but worse than the past. Worse or better I merely want to say that they are not good enough (and in a sense they never can be). I am puzzled on the one hand by the fact that on paper at least those entering our ministry are often well qualified and on the other that the general feel of our ministry is all too often intellectually narrow, tired and disinterested, settling for bland pieties. What do we allow to slip? I am alarmed that when it comes to filling vacancies where considerable ability is required (and I do not refer only to jobs in colleges) it is very hard indeed to feel there is a wealth of talent on which to draw. Recently two or three leading positions within the denomination have been filled from a short-list of one. Is that because of differences of theological outlook and opinion that rule the majority out? It could be. Or is it because our reserves are running dangerously low? Maybe a career structure would help to generate and foster the competent servants our churches so badly need.

How do we move towards it? Not I think by appointing a denominational commission to produce a report which the Council might debate and even adopt but then consign to limbo. Let those well-placed to make a difference — the Ministerial Recognition Committee which makes requirements of ministers, the Superintendents who settle them, the Colleges and other institutions which train them, Association Strategy Committees which ask how best to deploy them — put their heads together and get on with the job.

Michael H Taylor

Desertion

'Marriages end, some in a very painful way. When, in addition to the personal hurt, is added the horrendous burden of having been left in a house that is tied to the husband's job the sense of shock is compounded.'

After 21 years as a minister's wife, and nearly 25 years of marriage, Mary abruptly found herself to be an abandoned wife. One Saturday, in September 1984, her husband walked out on her and her three sons.

The following is part of an interview with Mary, dealing with the practical issues facing a deserted wife. She agreed to this being printed 'with the sole purpose of adding weight to the B.M.F's efforts to encourage the denomination to think constructively about ministers' wives who suddenly find themselves alone.'

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- N: Mary, after their minister's defection, how did the church people behave towards you?
- M: I felt surrounded by a caring, loving, supportive group and this has been maintained right through for over a year now.
- N: Did the church officers have to take any particular steps regarding stipend or housing?
- M: Yes. Here, I would like to say that the church secretary had a very difficult role to play and he was very sensitive and caring in what he had to do. However, he was obliged to serve me with documents, obviously based on guidelines from the B.U. Corporation Ltd who are the Trustees, that I found extremely insensitive. For example, I was served with a 'Statutory Notice', on behalf of the Trustees, informing me that, under the relevant section of the Rent Act 1977, I had no protected tenancy. The church secretary also informed me, in writing, that I could stay in the manse for a number of months, rent and rates free. The letter was very formal and had obviously been adapted from an 'official' document of some kind. There were some very insensitive things in it, for instance, 'You will maintain the fences and hedges and keep the garden reasonably tidy and well cultivated and free of weeds.'
- N: You saw this as a rather tactless attempt by the denomination to secure its property?
- M: Yes. I don't blame the Trustees for protecting their interests but as far as I am concerned, I was a member of the church and I didn't feel I needed to be acted against in this manner. I was only too well aware that here was I, sitting in a house that was tied to my husband's job, not to mention all the personal agony. Without the need for any prodding, I was determined that I would find some housing from somewhere.
- N: What were your immediate financial problems?
- M: One day I was in a house and there were two salaries coming in. The next day I was in the same house with the same heating, lighting and expenses (admittedly one less mouth to feed) and I'd got one salary. That was it in a nutshell.

N: How did you go about finding alternative accommodation?

M: There was an awful period of three months when I couldn't do anything. Fortunately, my husband and I were jointly purchasing a flat, which has a sitting tenant. I needed money for a deposit but I was in the frustrating position of not being able to realise the capital from this asset. Finally, once he had a job, my husband managed to take out a second mortgage and buy out my interest. This gave me a deposit and, because I had a job, I was able to take out a mortgage (which, living in the south of England had to be a large one) and buy a house big enough for four people.

N: At what stage did the Area Superintendent contact you and what kind of support was he able to offer?

M: He was on the scene very quickly, in fact the day of the desertion. I found him to be helpful and caring. He said that there were limited financial resources but I felt he was embarrassed by the fact that they were so limited. Had I really been in trouble, for instance, had I not got a job and therefore no hope of obtaining a mortgage, I think he would have felt himself to have been in a very difficult position.

N: Did you get the feeling then that, apart from making sympathetic noises, the denomination isn't really equipped to help with the practical difficulties you were facing?

M: I didn't feel the denomination offered anything significant or perhaps had anything to offer. I received help from people within the denomination but these were my friends.

N: You must have felt emotionally shattered by these events. Did you receive any professional help in dealing with these feelings?

M: Through a Baptist friend, I obtained the name of a counsellor who is also a Christian. I had about eight sessions with this counsellor which I paid for myself.

N: Where did you turn for legal advice?

M: I didn't turn for any legal advice for some weeks, and then not until my husband informed me that he had. Then I saw the Association Solicitor who (perhaps because he was already advising the church on this matter) pointed me to another solicitor.

N: What sort of advice would you offer to a wife abandoned as you were?

M: Well in a way I think the advice should come before being abandoned, namely, the distinctive problem for me and wives of the manse is in being in tied housing. Apart from the personal feelings that have to be worked through, this is the biggest problem. So all those who read this should think about house purchase rather than tied tenancy. I managed to get through because we were buying a property. If you've got your feet on the property ladder, there's hope

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Comment

Mary's situation is not unique. As Head of the Department of Ministry, Geoffrey Rusling circulated all the Area Superintendents to ascertain the extent to which wives have found themselves left in the manse, either through desertion or the death of the husband whilst still in office. Between them the areas could muster seven cases of wives being deserted by husbands in recent years. In addition there have been at least sixteen in-pastorate bereavements.

The emerging picture is of a high degree of caring by the Superintendents and the churches concerned, especially in looking after widows. However the amount of material help that can be offered is quite limited and most wives have been thrown back on their own resources. In this respect, like Mary, many could be thankful to have a professional career to fall back on.

What would happen if a young wife, with a young family, was left in the lurch in the manse with no money and without the safety net of a job? The denomination could come in for some very adverse publicity if it appeared to let her down and there are plenty of scandal sniffing newshounds ready to supply it — Mary had a terrible job keeping the national press at bay.

What could we do in the first instance about providing alternative housing for this bereft wife? Although there are two Housing Associations linked to our denomination their terms of reference do not run to rehousing deserted wives, or bereaved ones if their husbands hadn't reached retirement age. The stark alternative is to apply for rehousing by the local authority and to qualify for this the wife must have been served with an eviction notice from her own church — as if she hadn't been humiliated enough already! Of course she could apply for a loan from a HMF 'Special Fund' or a Trust Fund set up by private Baptist benefactors for the purpose, if either existed which, at the moment, they don't.

Ironically, the housing situation wouldn't arise if the archaic system of manse provision could be replaced with a scheme enabling ministers and their wives to buy their own houses. Over 40% of ministers already own their own houses. Isn't it time for a re-think on this issue?

In the second instance what financial return could the young wife hope for from the fact that her husband's contributions to the Superannuation Fund assumed provision for her after retirement? If she gets a divorce the answer is nothing. She would be much better off if her husband had died, she might have received £30,000 or more in pension rights.

A consultation paper — **Occupational Pensions Rights on Divorce** was issued by the Lord Chancellor's Department in July 1985. It is being considered by the Church of England Pensions Board. Perhaps the administrators of the B.U. Superannuation Scheme can give it serious consideration as well?

Breakdown of clergy marriages is an issue affecting all the denominations, not just Baptists. The Church of England has recently published a report by the House of Bishops entitled **The Breakdown of Clergy Marriages, Pastoral Care and Practical Provision**. It has the full weight of the Archbishop of Canterbury behind it. The report recommends a strategy operating at diocesan level (Baptists have always done this through the Superin-



WEST HAM CENTRAL MISSION

York House 409 Barking Road,
Plaistow. E13 8AL

Patron: Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother

Dear Fellow Ministers

Let me quote briefly from a letter I received recently:

“It is particularly pleasing to read of the work in family counselling; as a teacher, I am well aware of the terrible damage done by family breakdown. May the Lord continue to bless you all, and use you in His wonderful service.”

The most rapidly developing aspect of the work of the Mission has been the Family Ministry, headed up by Ronald Messenger. During last year, which was only the second full year of operation, there were more than 1,100 interviews involving over 700 individuals. Apart from this very specific counselling ministry, our staff have been involved in running courses, contributing to Conferences, meeting with Fraternalists, visiting schools, etc., etc. All this only serves to emphasise the tremendous need there is for a family ministry which is unashamedly Christian in its assumptions and methods.

One of the distressing facts to emerge is the increase in the degree of stress, and sometimes breakdown in “Manse marriages”. It is self-evident that there are pressures upon Ministers and their families which can easily be destructive. Sometimes there is an unrealistic and almost cruelly high expectation between the partners themselves. It sometimes seems that to be a committed Christian does not bring the ‘liberty of the sons and daughters of God,’ but rather added burdens of expectation and duty and, therefore, of guilt. Add to this the pressure that the many, and often conflicting, demands a congregation makes on the Manse family, and it is not difficult to see why breakdown so often occurs.

One of the most demanding and yet the most rewarding aspects of our ministry at Bodey House and Greenwoods has been the work we have been able to do with, and for, Ministers and their families. I know that you will appreciate the significance of this work, and that you will want to remember us in prayer. When a Manse marriage breaks down, it not only brings pain to the partners, but often has the effect of undermining the faith of the church members and the witness of the fellowship in the locality. All this underlines the strategic importance of such a Ministry.

May God bless you in your heart, in your church and in your Manse.

Yours in His service,

Trevor W. Davis,
Superintendent Minister.

tendents). It further suggests the setting up of 'Contingency Funds' and the appointment of special 'Visitors' to deal with what can be very sensitive pastoral needs.

What has our denomination been doing? The Superintendents were characteristically first in the field and discussed the matter in 1983. The Baptist Wives' Fellowship have been particularly concerned about the predicament of wives bereaved whilst their husbands were still in office. The B.M.F have taken an interest in the plight of the deserted wife. The Department of Ministry has been helpful and encouraging. These bodies are represented on a Sub-committee of the B.M.F which has met three or four times. The committee has no official status and does not seek any but it would welcome official recognition by the officers and council of the denomination that in this day and age ministers do occasionally desert their wives, however embarrassing and unpalatable that fact may be. It would welcome some recognition that men do occasionally die in office and leave wives and children in church property. It would welcome some recognition that the wives in both categories might reasonably hope that the denomination would assume some sort of responsibility towards assisting them in their hour of need.

Above all there needs to be a recognition of the broken-ness and pain an experience like this brings to most wives. There is scant recognition of this in the tactless and insensitive guidelines issued by The Baptist Union Corporation Ltd. Surely, sometimes, even formal, legal documents can be tempered with humanity?

And now for the good news! Bill Hancock, Head of the Department of Ministry, is keen to demonstrate a genuine Christian concern for the plight of these wives, to establish procedures and channels for practical caring and to mobilise resources to do it. He deserves our prayerful and practical support.

Norman Plumb

(on behalf of B.M.F Sub-Committee on Deserted wives and widows)

Training in the Ministry

Stale and predictable ministries; loyal but uninspired congregations; wherever this is the pattern it points to an area of serious underdevelopment amongst Baptists — the ongoing training of ministers.

'Ministerial training' traditionally refers to a period of three or four years in one of our colleges, prior to ordination. The colleges are developing new patterns for pre-ordination training, but now it is time we shifted our whole perspective from 'training for ministry' to 'training in the ministry' which may well start with a period of intensive full-time training, but would then be carried on throughout a minister's life to take account of the 'career-

structure' that Michael Taylor argues for in the accompanying article, and of course those 'changing times' that we tell people about in every other sermon.

Probationary Studies

A look at our present patterns will illustrate the word 'underdevelopment'. Probationary studies during the first three years after ordination are widely known as a bit of a joke, except by those who are set on taking further degrees. For most it means a modest reading list and an essay set by the college principal. With the pressures on the latter, this can hardly be a major priority; and pressures in the pastorate mean that the work is always being left for another day. With only the minimum of accountability, it is not surprising that many ministers tell cheerfully of hardly doing any probationary studies at all!

The probationary conference is no doubt of some value, limited by being a one-off experience. After this the minister is on his own as far as personal development and training are concerned, apart from the sabbatical scheme and the 'refresher' summer schools which have been appreciated by the modest number who have attended.

Sabbaticals

The sabbatical scheme is clearly a major advance, and has been used with profit by a growing minority of ministers. But as the main plank of our ongoing training programme it suffers from major defects:-

1. It is entirely up to any minister whether he takes it up, and clearly many have no plans or desire to do so, either because of feelings of their own indispensibility, or reluctance to be away from home for a period, or because of a part-time job that cannot be dropped, or out of plain lethargy. Therefore some who need it most are unlikely to get it organised, and have only the pressure of an occasional letter or leaflet from Baptist Church House.
2. It is largely up to the minister himself to organise the sabbatical, and naturally this leads him to an area where he already has an interest. Thus it is more likely to build on strengths than help with weaknesses. Some advice on subjects can be given by Area Training Officers (do you know who yours is?). The payment of the bursary is partly dependant on the latter being happy with the study framework, but in practice they are fairly easily satisfied.
3. Human nature being what it is (and the pressure of the pastorate) it is not surprising that ministers use sabbaticals to meet a variety of needs —one admitted to me recently 'to have a good rest'! No doubt this was his greatest need, but hardly seems like further training. In my own case I managed to combine some genuine study in the U.S.A. with a pulpit exchange and a holiday for the family, but the first was frequently threatened by the other two!

4. It is the **individualistic** style of the sabbatical that weakens its value most. Rarely does it offer the interaction with others, the discipline of accountability that most of us need. For some it could in fact deepen their feelings of isolation and loneliness, and minor fantasies could grow rather than be challenged. Some people are disciplined and organised enough to benefit from private reading and study; most need the stimulus of something more corporate.

In any case seven years is a long gap, or a long wait if you feel the need for something.

What are the other denominations up to, and can we learn from their experiences?

The United Reformed Church

As the tradition nearest to ours, it is significant that each province has an In-Service Training Officer, backed by a National Secretary, and that since the report of the Commission on the Ministry some years ago, the in-service training of ministers has become an official part of the policy of the U.R.C. Now a Review Group in Ministerial Training has asked for this to be further developed, and has proposed (a) that ministers be released for at least seven days concentrated study each year (b) that financial provision for this be made by the local church, the district or province, and the Ministerial Training Fund; and (c) that all ministers are encouraged to take a sabbatical term of one to three months every ten years (do U.R.C. ministers work a ten-day week?) The Provincial I.S.T. officers recommend that there should not be talk of compulsion, but that every minister should know of the opportunities that exist, and receive maximum encouragement to make use of them.

The Methodist Church

There is a national secretary for Ministerial Further Training, who reports that in 1985/6 419 ministers attended 21 courses organised nationally, and a further five courses were sponsored in districts. Many ministers attended training courses with other organisations, and 59 received grants towards degree and similar course fees. A 2-3 year part-time course at Diploma/-Masters level based at Westminster College Oxford begins in September '86.

There is re-organised provision for the training of superintendents, lasting several months, with two residential periods (what training do our new superintendents get?).

The 1985/6 published programme of courses includes nine-day residential courses for people in their fifth, tenth, twentieth and thirtieth year of ministry, three preparation for retirement courses, and two opportunities for 'five days in a monastery'.

Church of England

Much has resulted from a 1980 General Synod document 'The Continuing Education of the Church's Ministers'. This phrase was deliberately used to cover all the opportunities for learning which are open to a minister after ordination, emphasising personal as well as professional development.

This has helped to avoid what is described as an unduly sharp division between the traditional 'post-ordination training' (known invariably as 'potty-training!') and the developing 'in-service training'. These two are to be combined into a comprehensive programme for continuing education. A senior member of staff is appointed for each diocese, sharing this responsibility with the bishop and assisting each minister to assess his own ministry and consequent needs for continuing education; advising on the range of opportunities available — and organising others where necessary. A sum of £50 per person per annum was suggested as appropriate. A series of consultations has since been held to appraise the results, revealing a warm response, and substantial increase of both finance and manpower in many dioceses.

Roman Catholic

A 'Ministry to Priests Programme' has been the focus of a system designed to stimulate priests to grow in every way. Started in the diocese of Westminster this includes a monthly get together of a support group and a 'one-to-one' ministry between priests.

An interesting outcome of this programme has been the discovery of some of the real anxieties which face priests today. 'Almost invariably the chief of them is not, as one might suppose, celibacy, but the **fear of confrontations**. The skill to confront does not mean to be aggressive, but it does require the ability to assert clearly the values of the gospel, and the mission of the church, yet with respect for the other person; it is a skill that can be learnt'.

The Wider Scene

One could multiply the evidence from patterns of training in the world-wide church (particularly across the Atlantic); and from patterns of training in other professions. As parents we have all had to deal with the 'in service training days' for teachers. Ask your G.P., particularly if he is one of the younger generation, how much further training he is taking, and you may be surprised. Every go-ahead business puts great emphasis on the continued training of its staff.

What Should We Do?

The aim should be to establish a pattern of regular, organised, professional training, with the support of the churches. Let us start modestly with the aim of gaining acceptance for the idea of an annual period of residential training of one week, with regular daily gatherings in between. The churches could surely be persuaded of the value of this, and should be able to make some of the necessary finance available, which might be supplemented at Association level. The colleges would have a part to play in using their plant and resources during vacations; but the crucial aspect is the identifying of people with particular **training** skills, which may not be the same as academic or lecturing ability. If these are difficult to find we might need a period of 'training the trainers'.

The package might also include a development of a proper system of one-to-one relationships, building on but radically improving the 'senior

friend' concept, which seems only patchily effective anyway, largely because little is done to guide the senior friend as to his responsibilities. A good many seem to stop at a cheerful 'How are things?' enquiry at a fraternal. Unless a regular pattern of meetings is agreed and followed through rigorously, the relationship will drift until a major crisis comes along, which may be too late. And why are we assumed to need this support or 'supervision' only in the first years of ministry? In fact it may be during the various forms of 'mid-life crisis' or 'ministerial menopause' that the greatest needs appear.

The sabbatical scheme could be developed, and with more taking part perhaps something more corporate, less individualistic, could grow. Bill Hancock, Secretary for Ministry at the B.U., has ideas about the development of study outlines and the stronger use of Area Training Officers.

Compulsion?

Could such a scheme have an element of compulsion about it? No doubt hands of horror will be raised. But we have accepted (surprisingly easily) the concept of a compulsory superannuation scheme, to provide for our retirement. Nor do we question the compulsoriness of training before ordination; why should everything be airy-fairy for the thirty or forty years in between?

If I am right (from soundings at fraternals and retreats) that there is a real awareness of this need amongst ministers, who will get things moving? Presumably nationally, the Ministry Main Committee. Bill Hancock is known to be sympathetic and has written 'I think we have some way to go in this respect ... we should and could do better than we are at present'. A debate at this committee, perhaps leading to a document to be discussed at B.U. Council, would be encouraging. Meanwhile why should not Associations, with the support of area superintendents, be encouraged to go ahead and set up pilot projects? This would reveal how far the churches and ministers are really ready for progress, and would not be any drain on hard-pressed Home Mission funds.

When I was at college twenty-five years ago, I knew I was inexperienced at ministry, but with many of my age had the confidence of youth that we could go out and change the world. Now the world has changed — not by our efforts, and I am much clearer now than then what I need to know, and what kind of re-training, or perhaps real training for the first time, is needed. Unless something structured and with a fair degree of push comes along, I doubt if I shall make much time to do much for myself — who will come along to do the pushing?

Roger Nunn

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