

**the baptist ministers'
journal**

October 2013 volume 320

Special issue on the changing face of ministry

Contributions from:

Paul Goodliff

Juliet Kilpin

Simon Woodman

Simon Perry

Geoff Colmer

Clive Jarvis

Jenny Few

Paul Hills

the baptist ministers'

journal

October 2013, vol 320, ISSN 0968-2406

Contents

<i>Capability and competence</i>	3
<i>Formation in a changing context</i>	7
<i>Liberty to listen</i>	12
<i>The Order for Baptist Ministry</i>	16
<i>The College of Baptist Ministers</i>	19
<i>BMF: in the interest of ministers</i>	22
<i>The view from the associations</i>	27
<i>Reviews</i>	32
<i>Essay review/ Sacks: source of inspiration</i>	35
<i>Of interest to you</i>	39

the baptist ministers' journal© is the journal of the
Baptist Ministers' Fellowship

useful contact details are listed inside the
front and back covers

(all service to the Fellowship is honorary)

www.bmf-uk.org

The views and opinions expressed herein are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect those of the editor or the editorial board. Copyright of individual articles normally rests with the author(s). Any request to reproduce an article will be referred to the author(s). We expect *bmj* to be acknowledged when an article is reproduced.

printed by Keenan Print (keenanprint@btconnect.com)

From the editor

Mutatis mutandis

What will ministry look like 50 years from now?

Most of us are aware that average Sunday congregations are, on the whole, both smaller and more elderly than they used to be. We also know that while people may not want to spend a few hours on Sunday in church, they are increasingly fascinated with the spiritual dimension of life and they may also be quite interested in Jesus. A colleague in university chaplaincy says that students are now so ignorant about the Christian faith that they are no longer cynical about it—quite an opportunity! So how do we ministers relate to this ‘churchless church’?

In this issue we have a variety of views on the subject of Baptist ministry. The move towards professionalism, the challenges for ministerial formation, the huge opportunities of sector ministry, the impact of changing Baptist culture on ministry and association life, and the possibilities for nurturing our covenant life with one another as ministers are all given an airing. We might be under pressure, but every challenge is also an opportunity to develop new expressions of Christ’s kingdom

So what will future ministry look like?

As long as we keep before us the person of Christ and set our feet on the way behind him, we *can* re-imagine our churches and ministry for a new generation. Ministry—profession or calling, full or part time—means one thing and one thing only: to serve the people with whom we come into contact, within and without the church, because Jesus lives. SN

If you would like to submit an article, or comment on one you have read, please contact the editor.

Capability and competence

by Paul Goodliff

Most ministers are capable and competent people, committed to offering the best they can for the Lord who has called them. As the writer of a past generation, Oswald Chambers, so eloquently put it, ‘My utmost for His highest’ is our aspiration. Ministers with this attitude will seek to keep abreast of new developments, embrace continuing professional/ministerial development (CPD/CMD) with a willing spirit, acquire new skills and hone the existing ones, be reflective in their practice of ministry and adjust that practice to new situations as appropriate. They will readily acknowledge that formation is not something that is completed by the time they leave college, but is a lifetime journey of growth and change.

At the heart of this vision is the recognition that as a community of practitioners, certain standards are necessary: whether you aspire to be a professional (a word that has a certain ‘Marmite’ quality to it...I happen to like Marmite, others hate it), or the model of the ‘gifted amateur’ that seems to result from our culture where anyone can be a minister (after all, it’s not difficult is it?)!

Between extremes

Somewhere between those two extremes, most ministers see themselves as something like a professional, without the rather cold-hearted implications of that term, and belonging to a community of those who practice this way of being a disciple of Jesus and shepherd of the flock of Christ. At their best, the relationships that flow from this are covenantal rather than contractual. In fact, though, most ministers in local church ministry hold office and are financially supported in doing so, which means that something of the contractual is inevitable. When those covenantal relationships break down, and the goodwill and intention of acting in a manner consonant with the gospel becomes overwhelmed by too much hurt, misunderstanding and human frailty, an ability to assess capability in some way can help. We may not welcome it, but it does happen.

A capability process facilitates a clear and just way to end a ministry when the level of competence to practice declines to such inadequate levels that the life of

the church and its witness to Christ is fractured and eroded. As ministers we need to remember that we are there to serve our churches by offering effective ministry, and not the reverse: churches do not exist to provide quasi-employment for ministers!

Capability, competence and character

I want to draw a distinction between three aspects of a person's ability to offer good ministry in a church. *Character* is more important than either capability or competence. The emphasis upon developing thinking about competence has led to the misunderstanding that character is now perceived to be less important than various kinds of ability. Far from it: the most capable of ministers, without the character to be a faithful disciple, counts for little: whereas the good and godly pastor will be forgiven much that seems incompetent by those in the congregation who love her or him for who s/he is, and value the reflection of Christ seen in that life. For a long time we have had disciplinary procedures in place to handle the character and moral failures that blight some ministries. However, we have few tools to handle the incapable or incompetent.

Capability refers to the ability to deliver the practices that ministry embodies: such as the effective proclamation of the Word, sensitive and compassionate pastoral care, courageous and imaginative mission, conscientious administration and wise leadership of the church. There are times when a perfectly adequate competence in these practices is weakened by changed circumstances. I might be a very effective preacher, but when laryngitis strikes, I become incapable of preaching. I might be a very capable pastor of a church of 90 members, acting as the father or mother in the 'family' of the church, but find myself incapable of effectively pastoring a church of 250 members. It might be that with help I can grow in my capability, but age and infirmity will probably put me eventually on a trajectory of declining capability until I can no longer offer the ministry that the church requires. In these circumstances I retain my competence, but lose my capability. What I need is the wisdom and self-knowledge to understand that I can no longer offer what is required, and no amount of honing of my skills will deliver what I need.

Competence, on the other hand, refers to the

...the good
and godly
pastor will be
forgiven
much...

degree to which I am able to practice a dimension of ministry at a standard that is adequate. In general, competence grows with experience and reflection, and many of us will shudder with embarrassment to remember those first sermons we delivered (thank goodness I am sitting down as I write this!), but with training in homiletics, good apprenticeships in preparing and delivering sermons, and some care and attention to the task, most of us practice this dimension of ministry with real effectiveness. Indeed, we will not be accredited for ministry without a general all-round competence in ministry at the end of our college courses, more informally tested again after the NAM period has been fulfilled.

‘Making proof of ministry’ in that initial three or four year period is a test of our competence, and we already therefore have a ‘competency procedure’ for those newly accredited. Later it is possible to fail to maintain those competencies, for a host of reasons. We might become indifferent or lazy, lose our nerve, or just find the fast-changing contexts mean that we cannot keep up the pace of continually honing and developing those competencies. Here I might retain my capability, but be deficient in my competence—probably easier to rectify than a loss of capability. With some help I will regain all-round competence for ministry, and retain the confidence of those I am called to serve.

Ministerial development review

The tool that helps us to regularly confirm our continuing capability and competence is appraisal. We already have a guided self-appraisal scheme, based upon the Core Competencies for Ministry, but this largely ignores any direct involvement from those who receive our ministry most regularly: the local church. There has been a reluctance to involve the church because of the fear that appraisal can slip into a negative process that seeks to remove the minister, especially when delivered by those who lack the HR skills to distinguish the two. With the threat of Employment Tribunals (ET) being used by ministers, the risk to churches of lacking processes that will withstand legal challenge will increasingly be seen as too great. The call for local churches to operate appraisal schemes is growing so that, if necessary, a minister might be removed from post without running the risk of the deacons losing an ET hearing, and bearing its costs and fines.

What the Baptist Union needs is an appraisal scheme that is flexible enough to defend a minister from unwarranted dismissal procedures, but at the same time gives a church a valid process to establish that, for reasons of incapability and/or incompetence, the church can no longer retain an individual as its minister. Regular appraisal of this kind means both that a minister can resist the sometimes blatant attempts to remove him or her by the unscrupulous, and also that the church has the means to remove the self-

deluded minister who ignores all the signs that his or her ministry is failing. Both of these circumstances are thankfully very rare, but an appraisal scheme is essential to deal with it justly.

The hybrid tool that the Ministries Team is exploring is a Ministerial Developmental Review firmly in the hands of the local church, for this is the body with the prime responsibility (and who could be taken to an ET if they fail in those responsibilities). It will be externally moderated to ensure fairness for all concerned.

Conclusion

Some ministers will be alarmed by these developments, fearful that management techniques are being foisted upon ministers. We remain probably the only 'profession' that lacks appropriate appraisal, CPD and capability procedures. There are risks, of course, but the current arrangements are already fraught with dangers: that ministers are summarily dismissed by a church meeting without proper grounds; that incompetent ministers move from failure to failure, leaving in their wake a trail of broken churches that other, competent, ministers, have to rebuild; and that we fail to embed a culture of 'my utmost for His highest' in our ministers. With a world to challenge with the gospel, and a church that is in far too many places ageing and in terminal decline, can we really afford anything less than the best? Our churches deserve the best, but more importantly, our Lord calls us to be 'a worker who has no need to be ashamed,' (2 Timothy 2:15).

Paul Goodliff is head of the BU Ministries Team.

Formation in a changing context

by Juliet Kilpin and Simon Woodman

This article is a conversation on the formation of ministers for the new context in which we work.

Simon. I will forever be grateful for the three years I spent at Bristol Baptist College. The opportunity to have such an extended period of time in close community with others, who were also exploring calls to ministry, was extremely formative. I often used to think that I learned as much through discussions over coffee as I did in the classroom—and that is despite having some first class teachers! As a tutor, I similarly tried to create community space, for students to learn from one another in addition to the time they spent in class. I think that the experience of ‘college-based’ ministerial formation, at its best, is transformative as well as formative. It allows people the opportunity to journey towards pastoral ministry whilst creating safe space within which people can ‘try on ideas’ and change their thinking if necessary, as they are shaped for the ministry to which God is calling them.

As we consider what ministerial formation might look like in changing times, I would like to suggest three areas that I think remain vital:

- a focus on imaginative engagement in mission;
- a focus on deepening spiritual life;
- a focus on stimulating academic development.

It is my conviction that these three strands combine to shape pastors who are mission-minded in their engagement with God, the church and the world; spiritually committed to the path of discipleship and growth in Christ; and intellectually capable of communicating the Christian faith for changing times and contexts.

Juliet. I too am very grateful for the training and nurturing I received at Spurgeon’s College on the popular Church Planting and Evangelism Course which ran in the 1990s in partnership with Oasis Trust. The thought of being ‘removed’ from the reality of the world in the shape of ‘full-time’ training deeply disturbed me, so I was grateful to be able to do the academic bit alongside the practical learning that I received from my three-year church placement.

I was also very grateful for the few assessments that were not essay-based but offered a more creative means for measuring my missional understanding and competency. I will always remember the three-minute gospel presentations we were required to do,

and how surprised my classmates were when I presented the gospel according to St Durex!

Throughout my time at college (1993-96) we ‘part-timers’ often felt ‘less than’ the ‘full-timers’—some made us feel we were getting away with doing less and we often felt like we didn’t quite fit. Everything seemed so geared to equipping students for full-time ministry in an established church setting that our experiences and observations of the relevance of church diminishing in society sometimes felt disregarded.

While the language of pioneer ministry and mission lifestyles is now more common, it still concerns me that two decades later I am regularly approached by students in pioneering situations who feel the same frustrations, who feel they have to prove themselves even more widely competent than those working in more established models of ministry, while at the same time often having to juggle more responsibilities. I wonder when the shift will happen and pioneers will be regarded as normal and necessary, rather than novel and naughty?

Simon. When I was in my first church, one of my colleagues was what was then called a ‘church-based student’ (we now call them ‘ministers in training’, or MITs). For the past couple of years at Bloomsbury we have also had an MIT on the team. When I was a college tutor, one of my roles was to set up all the placement ministries for those wanting to take this route. I think it can be a great way of training someone for ministry; combining time in college with time in a church, allowing praxis and reflection to

interweave in ways that shape the person for ministry. But it is still primarily a way of training people for ministry in ‘inherited’ church contexts—the churches that partner with colleges in this way are usually either larger churches with the capacity to accommodate an MIT, or smaller churches which can no longer afford full-time ministry, but can provide housing and a half-stipend (or less). All our colleges now offer this route (indeed, it is now the most common way of training ministers), and assessment can usually include modules that allow for sustained reflection on the practice of ministry.

When will ministry
pioneers be regarded
as normal and
necessary, rather
than novel and
naughty?

Those who take this path are usually those with prior experience in church leadership (maybe having been an elder, or lay pastor), or those where the provision of a house and some money towards a stipend is a deciding factor—which brings me to the subject of money! Training someone for ministry is expensive—and the combination of tuition fees, living expenses, housing, and diminishing student bursaries means that for some, the best route (or indeed, the only route) is the cheapest route. I worry that sometimes we are trying to make a virtue out of a financial crisis.

Then there is the question of bivocational training for bivocational ministry, where someone combines a part-time ‘normal’ job with part-time training and part-time ministry. This enticing possibility raises all sorts of questions, ranging from the complexities of lecture timetabling (do we need to offer teaching at weekends, or in block weeks?) to the more profound question of whether someone is undertaking the bivocational route because they have genuinely been called to both, or because they are funding their ministry by doing something else. Either might be fine, but they are different, and the nature of bivocational training may need to be different for someone who is called to both, compared with someone who is doing one to fund the other.

We’ve moved a long way from everyone training for three years full-time in a college, and maybe rightly so—but I think we need to be alert to the compromises that this change asks of us, as well as to the opportunities that it affords us.

Juliet. A question that bothers me often is how we can enable more MITs to learn in experimental and pioneering contexts when these are most likely going to be the contexts that require a greater degree of self-financing (perhaps *via* bivocational ministry)—and are also the contexts that might challenge our conventional understanding of core competencies.

For example, an emerging church plant might not focus so much on preaching as its main form of communication, but might require someone to facilitate multi-voice participation. It might not promote recognisable church meetings, yet might have a high value of discerning the voice of God through consensus decision-making within the emerging community of faith. Its worship might not consist of singing, but may employ deeply creative and thoughtful ways of encountering God.

Are these Baptist anomalies? Or are they recognised methods of engaging with an increasingly unchurched society? If the latter, we need to urgently discern how these competencies can be recognised in our formation of effective ministers. And if these offer glimpses of elements of future expressions of church, then I feel it is imperative that we find ways of releasing more MITs to be formed in such contexts.

Simon. I think that the language of ‘competency’ raises a key question about what

training (or ‘formation’) for ministry is fundamentally about. I understand that we don’t want incompetent ministers, I really do—but ministry is surely so much more than competency? Apart from anything else, as Juliet has shown, the list of ‘competencies’ for pioneer ministry may be very different from those needed for more traditional ministry. (For a great exploration of this, see Ruth Gouldbourne, *In praise of incompetence*, 2011 George Beasley-Murray Memorial Lecture, *Baptist Quarterly*, 44.2, April 2011.)

Every so often, I bump into a former student and ask them how it’s going. Quite often the reply is something like, ‘Well, first week into my new ministry, ***** happened! College never prepared me for that!’ And of course this is always going to so—because each ministry is different. Each church, each town, each city, each congregation, each person—everything is different. How can you possibly prepare a minister for what they will ‘do’ in each possible place where they may end up? Well, of course, you can’t. But what you can do is shape them to be the right person for the ministry to which they have been called. And this leads me to my conviction that ministry is more about ‘being’ than ‘doing’. This is not to say that ministers don’t ‘do’—they do! Many of us work long hours, and fill our days with many and varied things. But ministry can never be reduced to what we ‘do’—it is more about who we ‘are’.

So as we contemplate changing patterns of training for evolving patterns of ministry, we need to find ways of preparing people for ever-widening spheres of service once they leave college. And maybe the best way to do this is to focus less on training for specific tasks, or on ensuring an ever-expanding list of competencies are all met, and instead to focus more on shaping each person who offers themselves for ministerial formation to be the disciple that Christ is calling them to be. Maybe it needs to be more about character formation than competency?

Juliet. My Urban Expression colleague Stuart Murray Williams made me chuckle when he drew up a list of core *incompetencies* a couple of years ago! It includes:

1. Lack of self-awareness.
2. Inability to listen.
3. Unreflective innovation.
4. Disempowering the congregation.
5. Insulating the congregation from the community.
6. Inability to work in a team.
7. Risk aversion.
8. Confusing activism with effectiveness.
9. Misuse of PowerPoint.
10. General rudeness.

It is tongue-in-cheek, but I suspect we all know ministers who exhibit some of these

traits! It highlights the danger of students graduating with ticks in their competency checkboxes, but with character weaknesses which may have remained unexplored. In the absence of sensitive truth-telling and honest dialogue, these weaknesses are likely to surface at some point in a person's ministry, most likely when they are feeling least prepared or out of their comfort zone. As UK society hurtles into an increasingly uncomfortable and unfamiliar post-Christendom context, we are inevitably going to face uncertain, boundary-stretching moments, so we may as well be prepared!

The colleges take formation seriously, I know. But they are also called upon by the Union to equip students for a particular type of ministry. Failure to enable their students to tick the boxes may result in tension and unaligned expectations that impact settlement. In a context where Jesus is as mysterious as Ganesh, where generations have never been to church, where we are disciplined by consumerism and where the Bible holds no authority, perhaps shaping all our ministers as missionaries is becoming far more appropriate and adopting patterns which facilitate this will springboard us most effectively into the middle of the 21st century.

Juliet Kilpin is a graduate of the former Church Planting and Evangelism Course at Spurgeon's College which ran in partnership with Oasis Trust. She is a co-founder of Urban Expression, an inner-city church planting agency, which she still helps to coordinate. She co-led the first Urban Expression church planting team in Shadwell, London, with her husband Jim. Juliet has been a practitioner and advocate of urban mission, church planting and creative pioneering for 25 years.

Simon Woodman trained full time for three years at Bristol Baptist College, and after a pastorate in South Bristol became a tutor at South Wales Baptist College. He is now the co-minister of Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church in London. For the past 15 years Simon has been primarily involved in ministering in 'inherited' church contexts.

Liberty to listen

by Simon Perry

In the UK, everyone knows what Christianity is, and everyone knows it's a dated, defunct set of doctrines treasured nowadays only by the gullible, the unreflective and the ill-informed. We are a Christian country, after all—or at least we were. But, thank God, we have grown out of all that fairy-tale nonsense. To be an intelligent, free-thinking, open-minded, switched-on human being requires that we abandon all those articles of faith upon which Christians base their lives. Better to avoid close proximity to these mentally, socially and morally retarded morons, especially when their lunacy is amplified at the collective gatherings known as 'church'. Churches, after all, are no place for anyone who knows what the world really is.

Such is the unarticulated but widespread general attitude of countless people among whom those in sector ministries find themselves on a daily basis. Of course, these prejudices against Christians and church are a caricature—although it is probably also fair to say that Christians often do very little to dispel this myth.

My own experience as a chaplain in a university setting (totalling five years to date, in two separate Cambridge colleges) does seem to reflect that of others in sector ministries: that many people in Britain still have a surprising degree of openness, even among atheists, to some form of great, absolute, unnamed, 'Other'. As one atheist philosopher (Slavoj Žižek) puts it:

What is the Absolute? Something that appears to us in fleeting experiences—say, through the gentle smile of a beautiful woman, or even through the warm caring smile of a person who may otherwise seem ugly and rude. In such miraculous but extremely fragile moments, another dimension transpires through our reality. As such, the Absolute is easily corroded; it slips all too easily through our fingers and must be handled as carefully as a butterfly.

Much of what takes place in chaplaincy settings, is the gentle, delicate work of hearing, treasuring, valuing these fragile experiences of others when they are voiced. Finding, in and through these moments, what we might call the 'still small voice' and allowing that voice to speak. The temptation, naturally, is to stampede across these moments with a set of correct answers, to bellow across that holy voice with loud mouthed Bible verses plucked out of context, to march boldly over the

God-given fragility of beauty with the smug certainties of biblical soundness. At least, this is what many (from outside the church) expect us to do, and are surprised when we do not. Who was that 17th century writer who said, ‘I had rather see coming toward me a whole regiment with drawn swords, than one lone Calvinist convinced that he is doing the will of God’?

Not that there is anything wrong with Calvin. However, one of the privileges of working in chaplaincy, is seeing the work of the Holy Spirit in places where we might least expect it—in a way that provides confidence to allow God’s own voice to be heard. But isn’t this a cop out—listening to those for whom we are called to care, without having much to say, without providing the comfort of reassuring answers, without rushing in to convert people into the blessed knowledge of Christian truth? Again, I can only speak from my own experience—which does seem to be shared by others in sector ministries.

The practice of listening is painful, exhausting and above all, silently vocal work. Being present to those who pour out their grief in moments of vulnerability, being with those who have dared to be open with you as a relative stranger, sharing, and feeling and absorbing the traumas that beset us at unexpected moments, is a silent ministry that speaks more loudly than the best chosen words. People know when you have listened to them—as those in any kind of ministry know. Rushing in with advice, wisdom, counsel and guidance is often a means of avoiding the reality of the horrors that many people face, and in which the voice of God really does thunder.

The Marxist literary critic, Terry Eagleton, suggests as much in his reflections upon the revolutionary nature of Christ:

Many people in
Britain still have
a surprising
degree of openness
to some form of
absolute

Only through such an openness to our own finitude, our frailty, our mortality, only by preserving...steadfast fidelity to failure...can any human power prove durable. Only through this impossible, stonily disenchanted realism, staring the medusa’s head, (of the monstrous, traumatic, obscene real, of the crucifixion) full in the face, can any sort of resurrection be possible. Only by accepting this as the very last word, seeing everything else as so much sentimentalist garbage, ideological illusion, false utopia, bogus consolation, ludicrously upbeat idealism, only then may it prove not to be quite the last word

after all. The New Testament is a brutal destroyer of human illusions. If you follow Jesus and you don't end up dead, it appears you have some explaining to do.

For some reason, only in ministry outside the church have I grasped the real meaning of this. I suspect that, as I hear those grappling, struggling, battling with the bitter and unsympathetic realities of the unfairness that is our world and hear these experiences articulated in unreligious words, I hear the truth of resurrection in new ways.

Resurrection embodied

Entering into the darkness of another's experience, not only shines a light into the cavernous darkness of my own, but fills the depths of this shared human experience with something. Whatever that 'something' is, it comes only after the point of hopelessness to which Eagleton alludes, and seems as fragile as the 'absolute' that Žižek celebrates. And yet, whatever this 'something' is—it emerges from what seemed like an abysmal, monstrous, 'nothing'. I don't know what the 'something' is, but it affirms and illuminates scripture, draws me into prayer, and makes the world look and feel and taste like a different place.

All of this provides a grammar for speaking about resurrection without having to start with an Ikea-like packaged delivery of something called 'the gospel.' Without having an end-game, a desire to convert our conversation partners, a hidden evangelistic agenda, beyond the simple readiness to listen well, seems to carry us for nearer the epicentre of resurrection than traditional patterns of mission.

Here, I sometimes wonder whether being free from the confines of church mission statements, aims and objectives and projected, measurable outcomes is an advantage. This is no criticism of church, as such. But churches, like other contemporary institutions, often subscribe to ways of being that quietly betray the institution's own reason for existence.

In Cambridge, for instance, scientists invest enormous amounts of energy submitting applications for funding. The forms usually include increasingly extended sections on the proposed social benefits of the research project, and leave less and less room for details about the project itself. And yet, those familiar with the history of scientific progress realise that the greatest breakthroughs in science often come about accidentally, among those who are doing science for its own sake. For instance, those seeking to understand the development of structural colours in pre-historic plants and flowers have no idea that they are paving the way towards a means of dealing effectively with cancer (by helping to isolate tumours as targets for treatment) or providing lightweight building materials (when nanotechnology engages in biomimetics). Listening well to the natural world can have gloriously unexpected consequences.

Similarly, churches are frequently under pressure to offer an account of their own progress in terms of measurable success and benefit to the local community, rather than simply worshipping a world-changing Christ and having faith that such worship might bear its own unexpected but God-given fruit.

Chaplaincy, free from the pressures of church management, can be a role in which there is the time, space and indeed, the expectation that listening to the ‘other’ happens for its own sake, a task free of any desired outcome beyond the act of listening itself. In fact, these are the only conditions under which genuine listening is possible.

I suspect it is for this reason, that the encouragement, gratitude and affirmation I receive in secular chaplaincy settings far exceeds that offered to me as a church pastor. I mean no criticism of congregation members—as if the role of congregation is to boost a minister’s fragile self-esteem! It is simply an empirical fact. Maybe it is because secular expectations of Christian ministry are so low, that when they experience genuine Christian care, it is a surprise. Maybe it is because outside the church, a minister is free to offer a different level of care. Maybe it is because secular ministries (in my experience) release the minister to invest more time and energy in pastoral care than those ministers responsible for the multiple dimensions of church life. Whatever the reason, ministers who listen well in a secular setting, may well encounter what feels like a disproportionate degree of positive feedback.

I am constantly astonished by the degree of openness and gratitude awaiting any those who listen well. There is nothing novel, or cutting edge, or unexpected in this experience. It is simply an encouragement to see that—given the gloomy realities of our world, the prejudice mounting against religion in any form, and secular cynicism about the church—so many people ‘out there’ are still hungry to hear those who prove themselves as genuine listeners.

Simon Perry is chaplain at Robinson College, Cambridge.

The Order for Baptist Ministry

by Geoff Colmer

I am unashamedly enthusiastic about the emergence of the Order for Baptist Ministry (OBM)—I have been there from the start, but can also see its great potential for supporting and developing depth and focus in ministry for the long haul!

The OBM grew out of the friendship of four Baptist ministers who had met together regularly for over 15 years and found the experience deeply rich and sustaining. In parallel, John Colwell had written a paper tentatively proposing a Baptist Order of Preachers; and so, in 2009, they began to explore the possibility of some kind of order that was distinctively Baptist.

They invited a small group of other people to join a conversation and what emerged from a 24h gathering at Ivy House Retreat Centre in Warminster was a strong conviction that has taken expression in a statement called *The dream*.

Widening the conversation

A wider conversation took place at the beginning of 2011 in Milton Keynes, attended by 52 people. Within a rhythm of prayer throughout the day, there was an opportunity to hear the story so far, to share in small groups, and also in plenary.

In October 2011 the Order held its first Convocation over three days at All Saints' Conference Centre, London Colney, Hertfordshire, to explore further. Of special significance were the conversations with Brother John Hennings, once a Baptist minister, now a Franciscan friar, who was invited as a guest. Brother John was of considerable help, listening and offering wisdom for the way forward.

In January 2012, a small group made their first vows with a real sense that this was God's time to make an initial commitment. This act felt not so much like an arrival as a beginning, with much still to process on the continuing journey—but a start really had been made!

Our second Convocation took place in November 2012 at Minsteracres Retreat Centre in County Durham.

From the outset, the essentials have been understood as a commitment:

The dream

We dream of an Order, a community of equals
where we are gathered and dispersed
journeying together even when alone
rooted within the Baptist story.

Where we hold a view of Baptist ministry
as a way of being that mediates the presence of Christ,
particularly expressed in word, sacrament, pastoral care and mission.

Where we seek to be attentive
to Word and Spirit
contemplating in silence and conversation
in stillness and in service
the Triune God -
known and unknown
mystery and revelation -
present in Christ
within us
between us
and around us.

Where we offer safe space
cradling, nurturing and holding us
that we may risk and explore
think aloud
hear and be heard
value dissent and freedom of conscience
walk together and watch over one another.

Where we live within the disciplines of this Order
committed to prayer
committed to gather
following the rule of Christ
with hearts set on pilgrimage
makers of peace
pursuers of justice
lovers of mercy
bearing witness to Christ.

We dream of an Order
committed to the way of Christ
faithful to the call of Christ
discerning the mind of Christ
offering the welcome of Christ
growing in the likeness of Christ
engaging in the mission of Christ
in the world that belongs to Christ.

We dream...

- to prayer, with a structured rhythm of daily office, sustained by spiritual direction and regular retreat;
- to gather in accountable relationships in a cell;
- to Baptist ministry.

The Office is said each day, mostly individually, though in communion with all others in the Order. Along with *The dream*, it is said in the cell where we gather as an expression of our commitment to one another. The cell also provides the opportunity to reflect intentionally with each other on what it means for each of us to be a disciple of Jesus and also a minister of the gospel. An important dynamic is acknowledging those things that distract us from remaining true to our call, as well as those things that enable us to stay focused.

The dream remains a foundational statement and gives much of the flavour or what we are seeking to be and do.

We have a website with further information about the OBM and from which the Daily Office can be downloaded, <http://www.orderforbaptistministry.co.uk>.

We intend to hold a Community Day for people to come and experience something of the OBM on 31 March 2014 at Christchurch, Stantonbury, Milton Keynes, MK14 6BN. More details will be available in due course on the website.

Further information can be received from Geoff Colmer, who is the Moderator of the Order.

we acknowledge
the things that
distract us from
remaining true
to our call

The College of Baptist Ministers

by Clive Jarvis

The College of Baptist Ministers (CBM) is an exciting new initiative for Baptist ministers that will offer support, resources, representation and multiple benefits to its members. At the meeting of the BUGB Ministry Executive in September 2011, Paul Goodliff raised the subject of what in the secular world would be called a professional association for ministers. The Executive responded with enthusiasm to the possibility with more than a few commenting they had considered some kind of body of this nature had been needed for some time.

Two things were immediately evident: first, for some, any use of the term ‘professional’ sent the wrong signals for what we would all readily agree is first and foremost a ‘calling’—so the term ‘College’ of Baptist Ministers has been chosen.

The second was that such a body, while working in close collaboration with BUGB, would ultimately need to be independent. Paul Goodliff and I, from the Executive, were tasked to establish a small working group to look into this possibility. The need for eventual independence was agreed but in the first instance the group would report their findings to the BUGB Ministry Executive to launch the CBM from a place of collaboration. That report went to the Ministry Executive in October 2012 and was received again with enthusiasm.

As part of the consultative process, discussions were held with a representative of the Baptist Ministers’ Fellowship, the Health Care Chaplains’ Association, and the BUGB Association Team Leaders; and the Senior Management Team and ecumenical partners were also kept informed. Our aim is not to reinvent or replicate what others are doing but to fill in the gaps that it is evident exist.

Vision

CBM’s vision is for ministers coming together for the betterment of ministry and for the advancement of the Kingdom of God: run by those in ministry for the benefit of those in ministry. There are four key areas in which we see the College making a crucial and needed contribution to ministry today:

1. Peer support for ministers. In most instances ministers in need of support and advice will rightly approach their Association Team Leader and this will not change. However, on those rare occasions when a minister feels the need for support and advice elsewhere CBM will be there for them.

2. The need for good practice. We believe that all ministers take up their calling with a desire to give of their very best for God, and we can and should learn from one another. Best practice is also about supporting one another and aiding one another at difficult times and equipping one another to cope with the trials that come with ministry.

3. Continuing ministry development. The Ministry Department made progress in recent years to encourage CMD among ministers, but with limited resources. CBM, by using the skills of its members, will provide a comprehensive CMD programme for those who want it.

4. Employment law. The status of ministers as office holders is being seriously challenged. Professional practice is also changing rapidly and ministers cannot keep fully abreast of these changes, but someone needs to on their behalf. CBM will do this.

Ethos

CBM recognises the work done by existing bodies such as BMF, Ministry Today, and the regional teams, and will seek to work supportively with these bodies as well as with BUGB. The ethos of CBM can be summarised as:

- the support of ministers, encouraging their professional development and practice of ministry;
- the promotion of excellence in ministry;
- run by ministers for ministers.

Benefits of membership

It is probably easiest to list the benefits we hope to offer members, as follows.

- Personal support to ministers who find themselves in dispute with either (or all) their employer, their Association and the Union.
- Professional comprehensive indemnity insurance for members.
- A programme of continuing ministerial development (CMD).
- A body independent of all denominational organisations.
- Help for ministers seeking advice, spiritual direction, and work consultancy²²

- A forum for members to discuss matters relating to the practice of ministry.
- A five yearly medical health check with Interhealth.
- Provide access to journals including *Ministry Today*.
- A consultative process for members in respect of all matters relating to ministry.
- Opportunities for members through policy groups to make theological contributions to the development of the practice of ministry.
- Regular communication with members.
- Access to resources via the CBM website.

Governance

The CBM will be an independent self-governing body led by its members. Initially an implementation group will guide the organisation until elections can take place, hopefully within a year of the launch. This group comprises Paul Beasley-Murray (Chair), Clive Jarvis (Secretary), Peter Thomas (Treasurer), Paul Goodliff (Head of Ministry), and six others, representatives from each of the new Association Partnerships.

We hope that CBM will be a body that truly meets the needs of ministers and serves ministry in our churches. Whatever is decided at this stage in setting up CBM it has been a principal we have strived to hold to that the College must be able to become what its membership determines it should be and not its founders. The College intends in all its functions to be a place where ministers can express themselves and be consulted about ministry matters and issues facing ministers in today's world.

We do not have all the answers, or indeed all the questions that need answering! We have made a start and if you are interested in becoming a part of this new venture by joining the CBM please contact me.

Clive Jarvis is the Secretary of the CBM.

BMF: in the interest of ministers

by Jenny Few

In these times of change and challenge, the call to mutual prayer for all Baptist ministers on Sunday mornings (part of the covenant relationship encouraged by the Baptist Ministers' Fellowship) has never been so important, however inadequately we may do it. For myself, more often than not it was a quick and vague 'please bless all my colleagues today', as I set off for church, hoping that the heating would be working, the musicians would all arrive, and that I'd remembered my notes.

Baptist ministers are a peculiar people. We are office holders, not employees (at least for now), we are called by and accountable to the local church, which itself is independent while at the same time part of the Association and Union structure. We are paid a stipend, not a salary, by the people who have called us rather than by a central employer. Our 'work' is not defined as a job, or as a profession, however professional we strive to be: it is a total commitment of ourselves to God, and to the people we are called to serve. At ordination we are reminded that we are 'set apart' by the Baptist Union for ministry, but our relationship with the BU is often tentative and ambiguous. We celebrate and enable the ministry of every church member and the specialist ministries now formally recognised by the BU, but we also work alongside colleagues who are not accredited. Yet the ordained ministry still has a unique place among us: we recognise and welcome Newly Accredited Ministers at Assembly, and we honour and remember ordained ministers and missionaries who have died.

The uniqueness and ambiguity of the minister's role was brought home to me in my second pastorate in Leicester, where I worked alongside a full-time youth worker who was employed by the church. He had a lengthy and exacting job description, a line manager and an appraisal structure. I had no formal agreement beyond the standard Terms of Settlement, plus the many and varied expectations and assumptions of the church members—everyone thinks they know what a minister should do!

But no-one really does, except another minister.

ordained
ministry still
has a unique
place among
Baptists

This is one of the reasons I value BMF, the oldest of the three organisations described in this issue (OBM, CBM and BMF) which seek to promote the covenantal nature of our relationships together as ministers. BMF also represents and promotes the interests of ministers to the BU.

Representing the interests of ministers

BMF began in the 1920s as an amalgamation of two separate organisations—The Baptist Ministers' Fraternal Union and The Pastoral Session—to speak on behalf of ministers at national denominational level. In the days before the Home Mission standard stipend, many ministers lived in poverty (though there were some who were more highly paid), and the BMF sought to raise both the profile and the stipend of ministers. For the best part of a century the BMF has continued to take up issues and concerns of ministers with BU staff.

BMF is an independent body, constituted and organised separately from the BU but related to it; members are accredited BUGB ministers, ministers in training and lay pastors. BMF is neither a professional body nor a 'union', but a fellowship seeking to enhance and celebrate the uniqueness of our calling within the challenges of ministry.

Speaking on behalf of ministers on current issues and questions related to ministry continues to be our most important and significant role. Over the years the BU has undergone many changes and this has profoundly affected the practice of ministry. The current BMF committee has developed a strong working relationship with the Ministries Team Leader, who attends part of each of our committee meetings in which we address issues currently affecting the lives of ministers. These issues have included all the major developments in Union structures. An example would be the impact on ministers of the changes brought about following the Denominational Consultation in 1996, which led to the current association structure and the appointment of regional ministers in succession to area superintendents. The key question then was about ministerial support—who ministers to the ministers in times of crisis? More recently the Futures Process throughout 2011 provided another opportunity to ask similar questions. The BMF was one of many groups consulted by the Futures Steering Group.

Other recurring themes concern the role and status of ministers, the nature of leadership, the standard stipend, numbers of ministerial students, the ebb and flow of the settlement process, the encouragement of women and BME ministers, the mentoring scheme for NAMs, appraisals, disciplinary procedures, the recent changes in the pension scheme and the financial challenge to churches etc. More recently we have talked a lot about employment law, same sex marriage and the current ministerial rules.

A helping hand

BMF-BF: what's that? It stands for the Baptist Ministers' Fellowship-Benevolent Fund, and it has been a great help to my family and I. BMF has given financial help on a couple of occasions when we have dealt with serious illness in the family and needed just a little extra help. It is because of the generosity of others, like you who are reading this now, that life has been made a little easier during some quite difficult times in our lives. BMF is also about praying for one another, and during these times of crisis we've have known the prayer support of the BMF and are eternally grateful for such a network. These are examples of ways in which we express our being together as a Baptist family. Please consider becoming part of the BMF and if you wish, make a gift to the Benevolent Fund to help ease a burden for others. Thank you. *Anon*

Resourcing ministers

Baptist Ministers' Journal (bmj). As well as providing a voice for ministers into the BU, BMF was also set up to offer and promote fellowship and mutual support, which included the important call to weekly prayer for colleagues, the encouragement and promotion of local ministers' groups, and also the *bmj*. Published four times a year, contributions are welcomed from ministers reflecting on aspects of ministry, wrestling with deeper theological questions, and digests of longer academic dissertations or sabbatical studies. There are also personal stories as ministers share their experience of trauma or challenge. Each issue contains book reviews and news of other ministers for information and prayer; this is probably the page that many of us turn to first!

Fellowship. One of the characteristics of Baptist ministers (and of churches) is that we don't respond well to being told with whom to associate. Most strategies for associating, from clustering to BMS Link groups, have had limited success. The same is true for the BMF's laudable aim to promote local groups of ministers: Yorkshire is the only association to retain a local BMF

structure. Our input into other association structures is patchy and informal.

Research. In an attempt to gain an overview of ministry and manse life, in 2009 the BMF commissioned a survey on Life in ministry, undertaken on our behalf by a minister as part of his sabbatical studies, and sent out to all accredited ministers by the then Ministry Department. More than 10% of those contacted completed the

questionnaire (a higher than average proportion for such surveys). The results confirmed both the joys and sorrows of ministerial life, with many finding a high degree of job satisfaction and adequate support, while inevitably there were distressing stories of loneliness and serious worries about finance, pressure on family life, housing provision for retirement amongst others things. The most telling of these results were reflected back in conversation with the then Head of Ministry Department. We will continue to build links with the new BU leaders.

Theological resourcing. BMF has also begun to think about ways in which we can actively promote helpful gatherings of ministers, and we have initiated the first two of a

A useful *Conversation*

I welcomed the BMF's invitation in July to a *Conversation* about same-sex partnerships at Bloomsbury BC. I had been hoping for this opportunity for some time, since I feel that as ministers we should not shy away from this issue. Only time will tell whether this will be a defining issue of our generation, but I believe it is significant. I am also keenly aware of the emotions and strong views that this subject evokes in us, and so was pleased that this invitation was not to a debate between two opposing sides, but a facilitated conversation in a safe environment.

I was not disappointed. I appreciated Stephen Keyworth's and Paul Goodliff's inputs as they navigated us through the legislation on same-sex marriage. It was reassuring to know that the views of Baptists (and other nonconformists) had been sought when drafting the legislation. Later, reflecting pastorally with a small group of colleagues, came the opportunity to hear personal experiences, and some good conversations emerged. Only two things slightly disappointed me about the day: one was the lack of a front-led presentation that engaged with the biblical text. Perhaps it was assumed that this could be done through our own study and conversations. Secondly, I expected more ministers to be there, seeing this as a priority.

It was a timely event for which I am grateful to the BMF. I did not expect all the questions I brought with me to be resolved and indeed I have other questions now, but the event did provide another stepping stone in thinking through the implications of same-sex partnerships for churches. My hope is that this conversation will not stop now but continue on into the future. We may well come to different conclusions in the end, but our witness on same-sex partnership will be measured by the quality of the conversation.

Lucy Wright

series of *Invitation to a Conversation* meetings, in a safe environment, for ministers to share concerns around a particular issue. That this is a growing need was highlighted by the first of these *Conversations* about the new legislation on same sex marriage, hastily arranged and publicised at Assembly in May. More than 70 ministers attended at Bloomsbury BC in London at the beginning of July, a meeting in Yorkshire has taken place this autumn, and there may be a similar event in HEBA. The BMF's aim is simply to allow ministers to listen to each other and share together in the hope that we discern the mind of Christ among us. Inevitably there are frustrations as well as satisfaction with such days; there is never enough time to cover all that needs to be said, and it takes courage to speak on sensitive and controversial issues. We would welcome suggestions as to subject matter and format for any future gatherings.

The future

Ministry continues to evolve and change; there is less certainty and stability as we contemplate the future of the institutional church and embrace the new trends in pioneer ministry and mission. Our forebears who began the BMF might not recognise what some of us do as ministry, but hopefully would be excited by it. In all the changes it is vital to retain the heart of who we are and what we do—men and women called by God and set aside by the Union for the sacred task of preaching and teaching the gospel however traditionally or wackily we do that, and in need of the support and prayer of our colleagues.

The BMF will continue to promote that sense of belonging in its important 'behind the scenes' work, and also in new ways into the future.

Jenny Few is Chair of the BMF. New members of BMF are always welcome—contact the Secretary or Treasurer (their details are on the inside back cover of this issue).

The view from the associations

by Paul Hills

I believe it was a Chinese politician visiting France recently, who was asked what he thought the major effects of the French revolution had been. He replied, 'It's too early to say'! This does represent something of a Chinese approach to things, but it could also be said with respect to the Futures Process and association life and with more justification! We are still very much in the early stages of working through the outcomes of the process. We are truly in a period of transition, and it will be some time before we know the full impact on ministers, churches and associations—not least because the impact is not one-way. We are all involved in the Futures Process and contribute to it as well as being affected by it. However, the BMF wants an article, so here are some thoughts!

Mission

The Process sought to put mission firmly at the heart of what we are and do as a Union. The proclamation of the good news, the compassionate engagement with society, the challenge to injustice, the witness to the ways of the kingdom, the nurturing of disciples all come under this heading and possibly more besides. Talk about the nature of mission seems interminable! The challenge to ministers is 'How do we and those we serve become less inward looking and self-referential and follow the way of Christ into his world?'. This will be a continuing challenge for the local church, associations and the Union.

Interdependency

This has become something of a slogan: 'our churches are not independent; they are interdependent'. Fair enough. Theologically that seems very sound and probably historically too. However, under the pressures of individualism and consumerism Baptist life still evidences a culture which is often isolationist. Why should I bother about racial justice when I live in a rural monoculture? Why should I bother about rural poverty and housing issues when I live in an urban multicultural setting?

All ministers have plenty to do in their own patch, so why worry too much about other

communities of Christ? The answer is that our commitment to Christ means we are part of one body and the balance of scripture requires us to engage together for the common good (Galatians 3:26-29 and 6:2-5). The simple practical fact is that we often need each other to be able to do what God requires of us. That's what underlies Home Mission in all its manifestations.

In practical terms the Process looks for ministers and churches and associations to be more engaged with one another in support of mission. So, HM grant funding is now devolved to associations. Work is being done to see how this might more closely involve networks of churches in decisions over grants. It may also mean networks being involved in ministerial recognition processes. Given the diversity of gifting amongst ministers and churches, this networking could lead to a wider sharing of expertise to the benefit of all.

Covenant

'Covenant' is a word being used a lot at present, but with little definition. Walking together and watching over one another is fine, but what does it mean practically? Once again, this is impeded by the culture of the day, so in terms of attitudes it could be said that this means:

- ministers, association staff and national staff see themselves as collaborators in the mission of God;
- Baptist churches see sister Baptist churches as natural partners in the mission of God;
- engagement in networks, associations and Union is seen as a privilege to grasp rather than a right to take up if so inclined. Thus assemblies become places of genuine deliberation and mutual vision casting;
- a willing disposition to collaborate becomes the default setting for what we do in all areas of communal life in our Union;
- as part of the above, churches will become more willing to release their ministers and others who serve them into blessing other churches and networks. The resulting wider experience will return that blessing to the churches as their ministers and others bring fresh insights and encouragement back with them.

A covenanted relationship must be one that is freely entered into and involves some priority of engagement and effort. My wife and I enjoy a covenanted relationship in marriage and she does receive my attention, even above work on occasion! Ministers sometimes indicate that the way the word is used in some Union statements feels like an

attempt to ‘guilt’ them into acquiescing with whatever the Union wants at any given time. I don’t think that is the intention, but the feeling can be strong. Part of the aim of the Futures Process is to move from an attitude of ‘the Union’ to ‘our Union’. As we all enter into the spirit of covenant as outlined above, we shall be doing this and mutual support and mission will result.

Involvement

The Futures Process has worked on the basis that we need to avoid duplicating our work and that we should find the best place to locate any given set of tasks. For example, mission is seen very much as residing most especially with the local church. Any other ‘level’ of work on mission has to be informed by and supportive of the local church, otherwise efforts will be made to supply the churches with material and encouragement they do not need and haven’t asked for!

Another example might be the production of materials to promote Home Mission. Is this best done nationally or more locally, or with a mixture of the two? Work is in progress on this, but it will certainly involve a more local focusing, and so, inevitably, more local engagement.

Ministers and churches will be asked to be more involved in these and other matters. This is likely to have a particular effect in the following areas.

- National and association decision making. Assemblies are likely to become more deliberative. If that is to work it will require us all to be more involved in the preparation and execution of such events. Moreover, the spirit in which this will be done will be that of ‘speaking the truth in love’ (Ephesians 4:15) rather than sounding off in cynicism! The latter is cheap and easy to come by; the former is precious, requires humility and is vital for the future of our Union.
- Being available beyond the local. We will need to give more time to spheres beyond our own. Associations may have task groups requiring members, or to find district ministers to share pastoral care, or evangelistic action focused in one area but needing people from a

...how do we, as
ministers,
follow the way
of Christ into
his world?

wider setting. Also, the new style Union Council will need people on it who are embedded in association and church life so that it will truly reflect the needs and aspirations of our churches.

- There is a devolving of work from Didcot to the associations. So far, this has mostly been seen in the area of ministry, with the mentoring of NAMs now being an association responsibility. Ministers will be needed as mentors and the administration of this vital aspect of the probationary process might be beyond the capacity of an association. Here might be another opportunity for service to the wider fellowship.

Prayer

In a sense this hardly needs saying, but it does need saying! All the above amounts to nothing without sustained prayer for one another. Although it may have been prompted by financial issues, the Futures Process was truly conceived in prayer and engagement with God. The Transitional Steering Group is seeking to function in the atmosphere of worship and prayer. The intention is that the new BU Council will likewise model that rather than be a debating chamber. We are all growing in the dimension of the Spirit.

Mission, interdependence, covenant and involvement will mean little without the renewal of our spiritual life. This is happening and I dare to believe the Futures Process is part of that! This is an area in which I have a unique responsibility for myself. Earlier I said that the Process does not all flow in one direction. We all impact it and are impacted by it.

As I, as a minister of the gospel, take responsibility for myself and my growth in Christ; as I take responsibility for caring for my church and all others covenantally linked to me; as I participate in sharing work and responsibility in the whole covenant community—then the Future will unfold in the pattern of Christ's kingdom. Please God, may that be so!

Paul Hills is Regional Team Leader in the Eastern Baptist Association.

In search of the church meeting

A response by Peter Shepherd

Thanks to Malcolm Egener for his piece in July's *bmj*. His description of dysfunctional church meetings rings uncomfortable bells. I doubt if many of us would question the importance of mutual accountability, seeking consensus wherever possible and the involvement in ministry as the privilege and responsibility of every member. But does the key to healthy church meetings really lie with changing forms of governance?

Changes in church life reflect changes in society in general, and no doubt the development of democratic procedures at church meetings was affected by the gradual move in society towards political democracy. Today, we are more sceptical about what democracy can achieve, and the call for clear and dynamic leadership has grown louder. The emphasis has shifted.

Organisational structures are important, but we are naïve if we think any model of governance can guarantee healthy church life. 'Accountable leadership' sounds attractive, but as always with these things, it depends on how 'accountability' and 'leadership' work out in practice, and it is not hard to see potential conflicts and ambiguities arising with the model Egener recommends. On the one hand, the elders or deacons set the church's 'policy', upholding 'boundaries and principles' for the minister to work to, but on the other the minister is given 'freedom to lead'. The church's vision is 'set' by the minister, 'developed' by the elders or deacons and 'agreed' (or not, presumably) by the church. I am not sure what that actually means.

Surely what matters more is Christian character, or to put it another way, how people behave within whatever structure is in place. The problems that arise within 'democratic' church meetings are far more to do with people behaving badly than the organisational structures themselves. By all means let's revitalise the way we do things from time to time, but let's not think that by doing so we are solving the challenge of church life. After all, when Jesus was giving his final guidance to his disciples, the future leaders of the church, he did not talk to them about structures. He told them to love one another.

Reviews

Edited by John Goddard

Interpretation and application

Craig Brian Larson (ed)

Hendrickson

ISBN: 978-1-59856-959-9

Reviewer: Bob Little

This book seeks to answer the question: 'how does one best make ancient biblical texts pertinent to the 21st century listener while still maintaining the scriptures' integrity?'

In a series of interviews, essays and sermons, it stresses the importance of approaching scripture with an accurate understanding of the historical context, as well as finding powerful new ways to communicate in a contemporary setting. It begins by examining biblical interpretation before exploring sermon application.

The book begins with eminent preachers, analysing the components involved in biblical interpretation. Starting with the preacher—acknowledging that it is impossible to approach any biblical text with a completely open and uninfluenced mind—the section goes on to make observations on 'preaching the melodic line' (or overarching theme) of a biblical book or passage.

There are also examples from the Pentateuch—eg when Moses got his preaching right (Exodus 17) and wrong (Numbers 20); a discussion on 'preaching parables' and making them applicable to a contemporary audience; as well as making preaching from the Psalms relevant.

The second part of the book begins by recalling Haddon Robinson's view that 'sermon application is like peeling an onion. At first it seems easy but, as you go through layer after layer, all you have is tears'. Theology, hermeneutics and exegesis are all part of the art, which involves bringing the 'theory' of the word into contact with the listeners' hearts to produce behaviour change. Maybe the only consolation any preacher has is that application is a skill—which means that, with practise, we can get better at it.

This book offers a veritable cornucopia of thoughts and ideas on sermon application. For those who're keen on a contemporary perspective, there's even a discussion on sermon application in a post Christian culture.

Much of the book's contents will not be new to the qualified and practised preacher, but the value of this slim volume lies in its ability to be a concise, accessible aide memoire which will challenge and provoke thought every time it is read.

There is no doubt that this book would grace any preacher's bookshelves. It might even become a valuable volume if it was read—at least occasionally.

***Recovering the evangelical sacrament:
baptisma semper reformandum***

Anthony Cross

Pickwick 2013

ISBN 978-1-62032-809-5

Reviewer: Ruth Gouldbourne

I suppose it would be possible to dismiss a book about the theology and practice of baptism by a leading Baptist scholar as more of the same, or Baptists going on about something that they really ought to have sorted out—or indeed, believe they have sorted out—generations ago.

To so would be a pity—and a mistake—when this is the book under consideration.

Cross has presented us here with a vitally important discussion and challenge. And if we think that either we are right and can stay where we are, or that the ecumenical developments of the last generation or so have diminished the need for conversation and reflection on baptism, then this is the book to disabuse us.

At the heart of the argument Cross presents is the conviction that neither current credo-baptistic or paedo-baptistic practices are adequate presentations of biblical theology and practice. He does not spend too much time on the frequent Baptist preoccupation with the proper subjects of Baptism, and not a great deal on the less frequent but still habitual anxiety over the proper mode of baptism. He is concerned instead to reflect carefully on the biblical theology – and to insist that it is one theology—of baptism, and to ask how we might reclaim it for our own identity.

By proposing the thesis that the term ‘baptism’ is to be understood as synecdoche, Cross sets out a powerful argument for a theology of conversion-baptism, and demonstrates that the NT writers understand baptism as part of becoming a Christian, not as consequent to it, while at the same time preserving an Evangelical rejection of a purely mechanistic *ex opere operato* approach.

As in all his writing, Cross demonstrates a deep knowledge of the whole field, and to read his discussion is to be drawn into dialogue not simply with him, but with so many others who are part of this conversation.

This is not an easy read; it is not, for example, a book to give to an enquirer—but it does not need to be. This is a significant and substantial work, of depth and integrity. Cross’s argument is convincing, and his proposals offer us possibilities. His conclusion that reform of the church rests in and is provoked by reform of baptism is a call we should not ignore.

Soul pain: priests reflect on personal experiences of serious and terminal illness

Jennifer Tann (ed)

Canterbury Press 2013

ISBN 978-1-84825-277-6

Reviewer: Philip Clements-Jewery

Professor Tann of Birmingham has brought together a group of Anglican clergy in this moving collection of deeply personal reflections. Mind you, this is no ordinary group of priests. The contributors include a bishop, a cathedral

dean, college lecturers, and university chaplains: all in all, a group of fairly senior and highly educated clergy, both male and female. Baptist ministers should not be put off by the word *priest* in the sub-title of the book—the Anglican view concerning ordained ministry arises infrequently. This is a book that all who are called to pastoral ministry (and many others, too) will find helpful.

Do we need yet another book addressing the problem of suffering? Another question also arises, '*Why priests?*' The answer seems to be that by vocation, training and ministerial experience they have greater access to spiritual and theological resources to articulate their own suffering. That is certainly true of the contributors to this collection. But the non-ordained may also have things to say, and sooner or later everyone has to face up to his or her mortality, and find the resources to do so. It seems therefore that the publishers have spotted a niche in the market and have filled it. I am glad they have done so.

These initial doubts do not affect my ultimate judgement that this is a very valuable collection of reflections. After an introductory essay by the editor, the various contributions describe a wide range of medical conditions, including strokes, heart failure, multiple miscarriages, several kinds of cancer, a severe psychosomatic disorder brought on by fear (unwarranted, it turns out) of developing Huntington's Disease, and male infertility (an invisible and rarely articulated shape in which death may

appear!). The candour and honesty of the contributors is both impressive and humbling.

These reflections on human mortality bear witness to spiritual struggle as well as to the deepening of faith. Such struggles bring to birth profound psychological and theological insights. Again and again the contributors testify to the value of the Psalms in coming to terms with their personal crises.

The importance of the Psalms comes out particularly in the concluding theological essay on the need to retain the ability to lament. There is a particularly striking quotation of Walter Brueggemann to this effect. So lament we must—for ourselves, and for others as we seek imaginatively to enter into their experience, and thus deepen our intercession for them.

This is a book worth getting and pondering deeply.

Reviewers wanted!

*Please contact John Goddard
if you would like to review
books, with an indication of
your interests:*

jmgoddard@tinyworld.co.uk

Essay review

Sacks: source of inspiration

by George Neal

One of the most influential religious leaders of the past two decades has been Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, probably the best known of all clerics across the UK and the wider world. He has the ability to communicate on all levels, but is also a scholar held in high esteem by universities in which he is often invited to lecture. He speaks on the radio (Radio 4's two-minute *Thought for the day*) and on TV; he also writes for *The Times*.

From these endeavours two small books have resulted. One is a verbatim script of his radio talks entitled *From optimism to hope*. The other is an enlarged version of his *Times* articles entitled *Celebration of life*. This latter book selects items of current news and comments on them, giving a response and interpretation from a religious viewpoint.

It is also in part a reaction to the traumatic loss of his father, whom he loved dearly. After the death Sacks needed to seek afresh for happiness and find reasons to rejoice despite the depth of his sorrow—these reflections show once again that he could only find comfort in his faith and his worship of service of this God as best expressed in practical concern for his neighbours. By offering these reflections he hopes to assist other people to face life with courage despite its tragedies and

difficulties and, with God's help, to find happiness despite everything.

Rabbi Sacks is in my opinion a Jack of all trades rationally and spiritually—and a master of them all!

He was first trained in philosophy, and did postgraduate work both at Oxford and at London University. He lectured at Cambridge on philosophy but later turned to Judaism and spent years studying at the Jewish College, becoming a tutor there and later the principal. In 1991 he became the Chief Rabbi—a position he has held with great distinction ever since. During 2013, at the age of 65, he retired from this position.

Because of the quality of his leadership, wisdom and profound religious faith and knowledge, he has been honoured both by religious and secular authorities. From the religious side he received a DD from the Archbishop of Canterbury and has been given honorary doctorates by a number of universities. He also delivered the prestigious Reith Lectures on the BBC.

Outside the faith communities he has been awarded a knighthood and elected as a life peer of the House of Lords by the Appointments Committee. Last, but not least, he was made a Freeman of the Borough of Aldgate in London. No other religious leader has earned such respect from so many quarters.

He has written over a dozen more substantial books on religion and related matters, wherein he has argued for the essential role of belief in God for society

to function harmoniously and justly with love, sympathy, freedom, compassion and mutual respect for one another. He judges that all the major religions are necessary for this massive task.

These books contain sustained arguments to support his thesis, but there are a few smaller books or booklets which deal concisely with some specific proposals. One paper of just 15 pages, written for the Institute of Economic Affairs, is called *Morals and markets*. The other book, of 90 pages, is the expanded Reith Lectures, *The persistence of faith*, in which he argues conclusively that religion is neither dead nor dying, but in many areas was growing and in places was taking fresh inspiration and showing signs of new life, even in those still strongly influenced by Enlightenment ideas.

Sadly, he has to admit some of this revival was being expressed in fundamentalist and ethnic ways and was leading to deep prejudice against those who did not believe the same, even to the support of many violent and even genocidal actions.

Such is the quality of this man's thought that I think he is contemporary religion's best apologist for its central truth and role; and his arguments for God's existence are very powerful. His critique against the aggressive new atheism, which ignores completely the evidence of the power for good of sincere religion in all areas of life, is in my view unanswerable. One famous journalist who is also a regular broadcaster and interviewer on TV, namely Andrew Marr,

says of Sacks' latest book, *The great partnership*, that it is the best argument for belief in God he has ever read!

Sacks loves philosophy and still studies all the major philosophers when necessary. One of his gifts is his ability to extract quotes from some very hostile critics of religion, such as Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Bertrand Russell and others; and show how they are often a helpful and illuminating guide to religious, secular, ethical and other thought. I would never have felt that Nietzsche would have been a fruitful hunting ground for someone who was advocating a return to sincere religion as the clue to answering modern society's most fundamental problems - but Sacks quotes Nietzsche positively. Like many wise theologians, he will not throw out the wheat with the chaff, no matter how hostile to religion the critic may be. Sadly, the current atheists are so bitterly prejudiced and insensitive to religious experience that it is difficult to find much in their writings that is helpful to one's richer understanding of life and its significance or purpose.

One of the fascinating things about Sacks' work for me, as a Christian who has two testaments, is the fresh insight he offers when he interprets the Old Testament. Sometimes it is only a linguistic comment on the meaning of the Hebrew word; at other times the exposition of an incident or a command or even a character, so familiar to me through my knowledge of scripture but which he interprets in a fresh light that differs from the approach of most Christian Old Testament scholars. 38

An interpretation I value is that of the early chapters of Genesis, in which he finds no grounds for believing in the fall of man or original sin—something that the western church, has tended broadly to accept since Augustine.

Sacks also has a wide knowledge of most humanist disciplines. For example, he writes wisely on politics and economics in his books. In his book, *The politics of hope*, he offers a politics of responsibility in which all social communal units, such as families, neighbourhoods, voluntary organisations, and religious groups, have a part to play as they get involved in society and its functioning for all, not just as special interest groups.

In this book, as in others, he castigates the demand for relativity in ethics and stresses the negative effect of replacing the idea of virtue with values that are individually selected preferences. On economics, the pamphlet *Morals and markets*, wherein Sacks, in an exposition of the creation narrative of Genesis 1 and 2, argues that work is a spiritual activity, a sharing in God's creative work. Unemployment and living on welfare are both demeaning, the production of wealth by man is God's intention; thus poverty is not a blessing but a curse and to be avoided if possible. He stresses that most rabbis have worked as labourers, professional people, or businessmen. Free market economics probably best describes the Jewish view of the scriptural model, but with many and heavy restrictions on the blatantly selfish aspects of the system. Concern for the less fortunate neighbour is a priority and

duty under God.

Recurring themes in Sacks' books include the warm personal nature of God; the need to follow his teaching in everyday life; the value of community, freedom, tolerance, education, the dignity of the individual made in God's image, the central role of family and its religious customs, the unity of all knowledge under God, and much more. There are three books written mainly for Jews, but when as a Gentile one listens in on this family discussion one sees the greatness of the Hebrew faith and can begin to understand how the Jews have kept their trust despite all the hideous tragedies, pogroms and genocidal efforts to erase their race. Here one needs to recall with penitence how the Christian church has been foremost in dealing harshly and cruelly with the Jews.

Sacks' last book, *The great partnership: science, religion, and the search for meaning*, is a massive all-embracing, comprehensive analysis of the necessity of science, religion, politics and the need for them to work in harmony. He underlines the many things they have in common and that all have a rightful place. If one is set in opposition to any of the others, disharmony, conflict and aggression will always break out. In this book, as in all of his books, he offers insightful, original thoughts that are both stimulating and deeply satisfying in their rational and spiritual power. All my volumes of his work have pencil markings on nearly every page.

Sacks is a holy man with deep convictions about the wonders of his

own Jewish heritage but with a desire to encourage adherents of any religion to be sincere in their beliefs; and by their lives and being to make clear that only a serious faith in God can be life-enhancing and life-transforming, and to give existence the rational and spiritual meaning for which the human heart cries out. If any serious thinker asked me to recommend an author who could help him find God and offer a rational defence of belief I would immediately think of Rabbi Sacks. If just one book was asked for it would without a moment's hesitation be *The great partnership*.

If you have not read anything by this godly and wise man you have missed a great deal indeed. Read him and deepen your faith in God and your rational grounds for such faith. He is a Jew and not a Christian; but often more Christlike than many who are. Read him and nourish your soul and your mind.

George Neal is now retired from ministry and lives in Devon. Contact him on neal.george@btinternet.com.

Can storytelling be theology?

Stories are fundamental to our Christian faith—stories about God's action in the world; stories about people's experience of God; stories Jesus told. Many have their roots in historical events, but sometimes the boundary between fact and fiction is hard to define. The stories Jesus told were products of his imagination, and yet they are profoundly theological. Exploring storytelling as a means of doing theology is not a new idea, but I am not aware of opportunities to do this within our Baptist community. I am sure there would be value in finding a way of bringing imagination and theological reflection together in this way—to encourage storytelling, to share stories we have created and to get feedback.

Do get in touch with me if you know of anything along these lines that exists already, if you have ideas as to how it might be done, or if you're interested in being part of such a group.

Peter Shepherd, Leicester
shepherd.peter@talk21.com)

Smile
INTERNATIONAL

**Only £2
per week**

**For less than the
price of a cup of
coffee you can feed
a child for a week!**



**Please sign
up today!**

www.smileinternational.org