

the baptist ministers'  
**journal**

**April 2015 volume 326**

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Ernie Whalley

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## ***From the editor***

### *Corporate discernment*

I am delighted that we have two timely articles in this issue of *bmj* addressing matters of relevance to the forthcoming general election, much heralded as potentially the ‘most interesting’ or ‘most unpredictable’ of modern times. How should ministers encourage churches to respond to the challenges of politics?

The old adage that religion and politics don’t mix has been well and truly kicked into touch, not least by the rise and rise of contextual theologies that are often indebted to liberation theology. If we seek to live in harmony with our faith every day, then of course it is political, and that has been demonstrated by the proactive nature of the church’s engagement with this election. I am grateful to the authors of these two articles for naming and discussing some of the ways in which it can be so.

Listening to a heated debate on the radio the other day, I did begin to wonder to what extent our nation exercises corporate discernment through the ballot box. We heard it said last year, after the Scottish Referendum on independence, that ‘Scotland had spoken’. Had it? Does one-person-one-vote ever really allow a nation to discern the ‘right’ way? Will Britain ‘speak’ on 7 May?

The Church Meeting can be given a bad press, but in the three churches whose meetings I have had the privilege of chairing, there has always been a sense that it is not just about us and a single vote per person (on the rare occasions when voting is used, as opposed to a sense of consensus). Of course, many new forms of church do not use this meeting mechanism—but in all the three very different churches I have experienced, there has been a willingness to give difficult issues both prayer time and space, so that decisions are made in the sight of God and with an awareness of one another. I am glad that we have known ‘the better way’ in our church governance, however annoying, old-fashioned and flawed it may sometimes be!

*Any questions?* SN

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

## Ernie Whalley's *Desert island books*



**T**ime on a desert island will give me an opportunity to think! I do have a ‘thing’ about islands. We had a great time visiting one of the islands of Hawaii for the BWA World Congress in 2010. Last year, we managed to visit the islands of the Outer Hebrides and this was a wonderful experience. In particular, I find the islands of Iona and Lindisfarne very special. My formative years were spent living near the seaside and I spent many happy times walking on the beach.

So, I’ll be alone on this desert island—gazing at the star-filled sky, listening to the constant ebbing and flowing of the waves on the shore. Apart from the sheer effort of survival, as I say, there’ll be plenty of time to think, which I will value.

It’s been tough to select just three books, alongside the Bible and Shakespeare. I might have chosen something by Jürgen Moltmann, whose theology and personal story of being a prisoner-of-war in Kilmarnock have deeply influenced me. But, in the end, the first book I would take is Walter Wink’s *Engaging the Powers*—discernment and resistance in a world of domination. This is part of a trilogy—*Naming the Powers* and *Unmasking the Powers*—but I suppose the editor will allow me only the one volume!

I was first introduced to this book by Alan Kreider, a good friend and colleague when I was a tutor at Northern Baptist College. There was a specific context: our middle daughter was diagnosed with malignant lymphoma as a teenager. How do I try to make sense of this? How do I pray? As I struggled for some pathway through the mystery, Alan recommended that I read Walter Wink. No book offers total answers, but this one helped to open a few windows. Chapter 16 in my copy is falling out of the binding because I have read it so often. It is entitled *Prayer and the Powers*. Within the context of the whole book, Wink outlines the ‘domination system’, its nature and its unmasking. He then explores the ‘domination-free order’—Jesus and God’s reign, and the breaking of the spiral of violence through the power of the cross. Within all the mystery, amidst all the powers that are so destructive across the world, we are beckoned to engage in prayer with the God whose defining nature is ‘love’. ‘All the sorrow, all the aching rings with pain the heart of God’ (from the hymn *God is love*, by Timothy Rees). With such a God, we get caught up in a whirlwind at times with the forces of evil.

Some years later, Anna died. In the deepest of silences, with space to recalibrate faith, the solidarity of the cross and the hope of resurrection have become more profoundly real. This

book also spurred me on to understand more about conflict and the opportunities for mediation in the world and in the church. So much that is adventurous, innovative and exciting in today's church can be weakened by tensions and breakdowns in relationships. If we can learn to 'engage the Powers', it does not have to be so.

My second book is by Richard Rohr—a Franciscan priest. I was pointed in his direction by my spiritual accompanier. Of Rohr's many wonderful books, I am taking here the one entitled: *Falling upwards: a spirituality for the two halves of life*. Although this book was published only in 2011, most of the pages in my copy are marked with my pencil—so apologies to those who see this as 'vandalism'! Rohr has a superb command of language—using pithy phrases which support deep reflection. On the desert island, I'll certainly have plenty of time to do that!

*Falling upwards* helps us to track our early lives and experiences of faith. Rohr sees the first half of life as creating a container, a context for helping us to answer questions of identity, such as 'What makes me significant?'. Journeying on, we can embrace and transcend what has gone on before if we are willing to grow. Old and new wine skins sum this up in gospel terms. God has no grandchildren, only children—so each generation has the opportunity to make its own discoveries of the Spirit.

In the first half of life, we can easily become so self-preoccupied that we leave little time for simply living, allowing friendships to flourish, beholding and appreciating the beauty around us or to gaze on God. So in the second half of life, as we grow, we are not caught up in the 'either/or' but we can bathe in the ocean of 'both/and'...and life can become more expansive. In faith terms, we can rejoice in the freedom of being part of the one 'holy catholic and apostolic church'. Rohr quotes approvingly from Gregory of Nyssa from the 4th century: 'Sin happens whenever we refuse to keep growing'. Falling upwards means seeing the future as experiencing a broader and deeper world, living inside the Big Picture of God's amazing grace—fulfilling our deepest desires for God, everything good, true and beautiful, and to make our own impact on the world around us.

Being on the desert island will give me space to reflect on where I am on such a journey. I was shaped and formed through the Church of Ireland and the Elim Pentecostal Church. To the latter, I owe the debt of anticipating worship together as a living encounter with God and a devotion to scripture. On the road, my life has been enriched by theological encounter, multicultural experience and engagement with Christians from so many varied traditions. Liturgies from Iona and the Northumbria Community have a vital place for me. The exciting journey continues...

My third book, following in the steps of St Francis, is a volume on birds. I assume I will see some birds on the island—whether resident or calling in for a rest, like the albatross on its incredible journey across the globe. My current pocket version, *Collins' wild guide to birds*, may not list all the birds I might see—I suppose it will depend on where the island is. The bird book I have was actually given to me by my mother on the 25th anniversary of my ordination. My mother was a godly woman and I owe much to her influence (and she loved birds too!)—so a book that reminds me of her life would be fitting to take with me. However, this book only covers British birds, so if the island is in the Tropics, I would want the best book there is on

birds of that region.

Through our conservatory window at home, I enjoy watching the bluetits as they energetically build a nest in the nesting box and then begin the work of feeding their young. But then I get angry when I see magpies threatening the nesting box! I am struck by learning that geese flying in formation gain extra speed and conserve energy by changing positions regularly. There are lessons there on team working! We can learn a lot from birds. Indeed, it was Jesus who told us: 'Consider the birds', and then issued the call to put the Kingdom first and not be anxious. This passage from Matthew 6: 25-34 was the first I ever read in public as a seven-year old in a mission hall among the Mourne Mountains in Northern Island. I am still trying to live it out.

Now for a luxury: well, I do enjoy music. On the island, I would appreciate having some kind of solar-powered music player with a wide selection of CDs, classic and contemporary, This would have to include Handel's *Messiah*, performed by the Huddersfield Choral Society and, if possible, a recording of my wife, Mary, playing the piano. But, on reflection, maybe the luxury I have to choose is an enormous flag on a pole to attract the attention of a passing ship or a low-flying plane so they can come and rescue me! A desert island will be fine for a short while but I love my family, friends and community too much to be alone permanently.

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# Preaching and the election

by Phil Jump

**T**he forthcoming General Election will be unlike any in living memory. Since WW2, we have gone to the polls almost certain that one of two large political parties will form our government. But as the countdown to polling day 2015 continues, this remains an election that no-one can call. The resurgence of SNP and the Greens; the anticipated demise of the Liberal Democrats; the advent of UKIP as a serious contender—all combine with a swing between Labour and Conservative to leave a political landscape of significant uncertainty. Predictions suggest that, in many constituencies, the ‘new parties’ are unlikely to win seats, but will deflect votes away from the incumbent to allow the previous runners-up to be first past the post.

This is also an election in which Christian opinion and action is enjoying a notably high profile. Insiders suggest that Church of England bishops were quietly surprised by the media interest in their ‘pastoral letter’—*Who is my neighbour?* It will not be lost on us that our own Joint Public Issues Team has developed a similar resource: *Love your neighbour—think, pray, vote*. This media interest raises questions for preachers and church leaders: what should we say to God’s people? What influence is it appropriate for us to exercise? Why does it matter? In what ways have things changed since the last election? Why are faith perspectives enjoying such a high profile?

In response, we might begin by recognising some of the ways in which the landscape has changed in the past decade or so.

***The place of preaching.*** Preaching is a highly influential and persuasive activity; a reality increasingly acknowledged within politics. The recently deported Muslim cleric Abu Hamsa was regularly designated by the media as a ‘preacher of hate’, and as we struggle to explain the radicalisation of British Muslims, fingers increasingly point at preachers and clerics. Christians are not exempt from this judgement, and whereas some years ago people might have basked in the designation of ‘radical preacher’, it is unlikely to be a comfortable label today! In the midst of this highly charged political climate we might well ask, ‘What are we called to be preachers of?’. How might our preaching be perceived and what limitations might we also fear?

***The growth of extremism.*** ‘Radicalisation’ is a term that is relatively new to popular vocabulary. Criminality is no longer confined to acts and deliberate plans: to inspire or reframe the thinking of an individual in opposition to the received narratives of ‘the free world’ is considered an act of terror—and Christian preachers may well claim to be



countercultural. Speaking at an NWBA conference some years ago, Steve Holmes described preaching as the task of someone ‘who passionately believes something and wants others to believe it too’. The backdrop against which we fulfil that task is an increasingly complex one.

***The emergence of the Lobbying Act.*** There are now constraints on the political messages that charities can disseminate. At my most cynical, I might say that politicians seem to have become so morally illiterate that it is no longer *their* responsibility to resist inappropriate incentive and persuasion, but that of the interest groups not to offer it! Perhaps this is unfair, but it is yet another indicator of the inherent power of a persuasive narrative. As people of faith, we have some of the most effective vocabulary of influence available: ‘Because God wants you to’; or ‘because you will go to heaven if you do’ are extremely potent incentives—if you don’t believe me, ask a suicide bomber. Preaching during an election campaign could potentially be fraught with difficulty.

***Broader political engagement.*** We might therefore be inclined to keep our heads down and quietly ignore the election issues, but we are also likely to find ourselves preaching to a far more politically aware congregation. There is a notable increase in Christian media activity in the run-up to this election, with conflicting messages being promoted. There are Christians to the right, to the left, and all stops in between; and each group seems to be convinced that their politics are rooted in our faith narrative. Now, more than ever, we need to equip the people of God to filter and decipher these various messages. One thing that alarms me as I travel around churches is the often uncritical way in which envelopes of literature seem to be opened and distributed, with little thought about the appropriateness of the messages being propagated. There is a tension between providing leadership to a congregation, yet respecting a variety of political views and not abusing our positions by promoting our own.

***UKIP.*** The emergence of UKIP as a mainstream party has muddied the waters. We have always managed to embrace a breadth of political opinion in our churches, but within limits. We seemed fairly content that God’s grace could extend to Conservative, Labour and Liberal voters, and seemed equally content to dismiss BNP and other highly radical parties as beyond the pale. It felt OK to embrace nationalism within the two Celtic nations (Wales and Scotland) but to dismiss it as fascism in England. UKIP does not fit easily into any mould. Some Christian communities are quite adamant that its values are incompatible with their own, while at the same time a number of UKIP activists are equally open about a faith identity that informs their politics. But UKIP’s rise has also affected the tone and content of the discussion, opening the door to more extreme and outspoken views in the mainstream debates. We are faced therefore with new potential tensions within the Christian community. How do we deal with that, pastorally and ideologically,

when the main vehicle of communication between most Christian disciples and the narratives of their faith is the Sunday service?

As we navigate these tricky waters, we recognise that we are not immune from the various human tendencies that stir them, and have no infallible answers to the questions that emerge. As ministers and church leaders we have our own political views—some, we will be aware of; others will be more embedded and enculturated. How do we remain relevant to the ongoing debates, yet ensure that we proclaim God’s word and not a personal ideology? If preachers are those who passionately believe what they want others to believe—where do the boundaries lie?

The ideological temperature in our nation rises during an election campaign. We will gather for worship, having been impacted and exposed to some pretty high octane politics in the days before. To what degree should worship and preaching be a ‘detox’ and to what degree is it a ‘sifting’? To what degree should it contribute to and enable others to contribute to the debate? All are valid, but poor quality engagement will stand out—at the very least, our preaching needs to be up to the mark.

We could still argue that the minister’s task during an election campaign is no different from any other time. In terms of public worship, I suggest that there are three core elements.

***1. Enabling a congregation to encounter the living God through his word.*** Worship is first and foremost about creating a place of encounter; where people do not simply meet with one another, rehearse the facts and truths of their faith, or indeed subject themselves to our opinions, but consciously seek the presence of the living God, which shapes our discipleship. It may seem something of a cliché, but the question ‘how would Jesus vote?’ is a serious one—or perhaps more relevant, ‘how would Jesus want me to vote?’.

Much will be said about the people of God being a prophetic voice in our land. While this is something I would struggle to disagree with, I often wonder what we actually understand by ‘prophetic’. Is our perception more about an opinion on current issues than about seeking to root that opinion in the voice of the Spirit? We cannot deny that the prophets of the Old and New Testaments were operating, more often than not, in the political arena, but what marked them out was the authority with which they spoke; a divine designation that is most frequently summarised by the simple but profound designation, ‘thus says the Lord’.

So perhaps our principal task in the run up to an election is to refocus Christian disciples on the all-seeing, all-knowing God; to nurture afresh their relationship with him, so that we might truly act as those who ‘walk in the Spirit’.

***2. Nurturing a congregation’s understanding of the revealed truths of our scriptures.*** We should engage in the political process prayerfully and with a true sense of seeking after God’s heart, but at times this can be an abstract ideal; and at its worst, little more

than wrapping up our own ideals and opinions in spiritual vocabulary.

The God we encounter has met and engaged with his people for centuries: a God who describes himself as ‘the same yesterday, today and forever’. As we explore the stories of this God and his people, significant political narratives emerge. ‘Word become flesh’ is a reminder that our gospel is not abstract truth, but earthed in the reality of human experience. The God who became flesh was crucified and subjected to a political execution through a coalition of local and international leaders. The message and life of Christ made waves in royal palaces, regional councils and seats of Roman government. At the heart of that message was a call for justice, liberation of the oppressed, a redistribution of economic power and wealth. It was a message that was neither welcome nor tolerated.

Our scriptures are rich with political messages and narratives, and for the preacher these are both a resource and a challenge. They offer a broad resource on which we can draw, yet we must recognise the place of privilege in which we stand, and ensure that it is not just our own political concerns that we declare.

The story of the Good Samaritan, which has yielded the key straplines for many Christian election resources, is one such example. By placing a Samaritan centre stage, Jesus makes the story highly political, striking at the very heart of a racial and political divide and introducing themes of integration, social inclusion, economic migration, devolution, community cohesion, multiculturalism, to name but a few.

The call to ‘love our neighbour’ is particularly pertinent. Policies are increasingly designed to appeal to the self-interest of one particular sector of the electorate, gradually building support through campaigns aimed at other groupings. If we can be seduced by one particular outcome, we might quietly overlook other less favourable political intentions. This is perhaps why Christians are rediscovering the language of ‘common good’, recognising that God’s ideal is a society that is fair and just for all.

But the Good Samaritan is by no means the only resource at our disposal. I remember some years ago being struck by the fact that a significant economic crisis in Europe occurred during Advent. Christians, on the whole, tend to climb aboard the bandwagon of craving stability and security, forgetting that the key scriptures of Advent described the rich becoming poor, power structures collapsing, materialist economies being overturned, as a sign of God’s coming. We might

Christians are  
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good

also look to some of the core messages of Deuteronomy and Leviticus as definitive texts on the values and priorities that God would seek in a wholesome society.

**3. *Equipping a congregation to live and act as disciples of Jesus.*** I would suggest that the third key purpose of worship is to equip and commission God's people to live out their faith within everyday life—not simply how we might cast our vote, but how we should conduct ourselves during an election campaign. There is a now long tradition of churches arranging local hustings, trusted and recognised as those who can facilitate an impartial and informative debate between candidates. In doing so, we might also ask what key agendas we might seek to set within the political narratives. This of course, is the underlying philosophy of the Joint Public Issues resource, seeking to centre that discussion on truth, justice, peace and wellbeing (common good).

We have already noted that it would be a very unusual congregation that did not contain a fair breadth of political opinion. This campaign is likely to be a particularly contentious one—so perhaps another task for God's people is to model how to disagree well, to keep things in perspective, and to challenge extremist and prejudiced views, irrespective of their political flavour.

It is because we live as followers of Jesus Christ that the church is not simply the propagator of political opinion, but a vehicle of social action. I would argue that one of our greatest strengths, and perhaps the reason for our increasing political awareness, is the resurgence of the evangelical social conscience in recent years. Our engagement in our communities provides us with a credible platform from which to speak, and informs our narratives, but must also be the means by which we give substance to our political ideals. Whatever the shape and political shade of our government, God's people are called to pursue God's kingdom in actions as well as words.

The election offers itself as a significant opportunity, yet in our desire to be relevant, let us not lose sight of our centre, which is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. For all their political overtones, the law books of the Old Testament are primarily an exposition of what it means to live as those who love the Lord our God fully. Jesus invites us to love our neighbours as ourselves.

No political party can solve every ill, nor can any produce a manifesto with which we will fully agree. It is when society as a whole, not politicians on its behalf, embraces the eternal imperative to love God and love our neighbours that we will become the community God intends. Our effective engagement in the political arena must be the consequence of our commitment to proclaim the gospel, not a substitute for it.

***Phil Jump is Regional Team Leader of the NWBA.***

# Test and trial of democracy?

by Colin Cartwright

**F**orged within dissenting communities through the past four centuries, Baptists have historically prided themselves on providing a nonconformist alternative to the establishment. There is a strong case for arguing that, along with other dissenting groups, Baptists played an important part in forming our democratic system of government. So, it is not without some irony that today's most complete critique of our current democracy should come from the established church!<sup>1</sup> The Church of England bishops are the new nonconformists.

There is much helpful analysis in this positive and hope-filled document, which is titled with the searching question of Jesus, *Who is my neighbour?* The section that deals with *The community of nations* is equally challenging to our status quo. Concerning the commonly assumed renewal of Trident, the bishops assert that 'the traditional arguments for nuclear deterrence need re-examining'.<sup>2</sup> Even more challenging for our politicians is their conclusion to this paragraph: '...such is the talismanic power of nuclear weaponry that few politicians seem willing to trust the electorate with a real debate about the military capacity we need in the world today'.

The Government's reluctance to debate Trident was demonstrated when the Ministry of Defence slipped a written statement into the Commons last year—on 18 December, the day Parliament began its Christmas recess. Of course, the British public have been promised, early in the next Parliament, 'a full debate' about Trident. But what exactly does this mean? This 'full debate' comes long after Parliament has already agreed to spend £3bn on preparing for the anticipated Trident renewal. As Kate Hudson, General Secretary of CND rightly declared: '...the Government had no democratic mandate to authorise the Trident expenditure ahead of the vote in 2016'.<sup>3</sup>

Are the Anglican  
bishops the new  
nonconformists?

As we approach the 2015 General Election, the UK electorate is faced with a situation in which all three major parties are recommending some form of renewal of our nuclear weapons capacity. When I asked my MP last year where my views of opposing Trident renewal were represented in Parliament, no real answer was given. I was told that elections were

not a matter of single issue politics. Yet, in a year when we will mark the 70th anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, I and many others opposed to Trident renewal, are faced with the inevitable prospect of being led by a political party (or combination of political parties) which will give the nod to Trident-2, no matter how we choose to vote. What kind of democracy is this?

With a *fait accompli* already lined up, can we expect a national programme of debates throughout the country to engage the electorate in this once-in-a-lifetime decision? Will we see the kind of intelligent public debates we witnessed during the referendum over Scottish Independence last year? Or is this a matter of a few hours given to the matter within the House of Commons? If so, what kind of genuine debate will this provide, given that the MPs have already voted in favour of new nuclear weapons earlier this year? In a short Parliamentary debate on 19 January, prompted by the SNP, Plaid Cymru and the Green Party, MPs voted 10 to 1 in favour of renewing our nuclear weapons.

This begs the question: just how representative of the British people are those who are supposed to represent us in Parliament? At least 45% of those who voted during the Scottish referendum were willing to say goodbye to Trident. While this result may or may not be replicated were there a UK-wide referendum about the UK's nuclear weapons, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that our main political parties and their MPs are dramatically out of touch with the much lower enthusiasm of the British population for Trident renewal.

Not only are our political leaders hopelessly out of touch with their people on this issue, they are also out of step with the international community. In recent years the UK government has refused to attend two international conferences on the humanitarian effects of nuclear weapons, which marked an important step forward in international discussions on the issue. It was only at the last minute, following public pressure, that the UK and US governments decided to attend the third conference in the series in Vienna last year. Our government's refusal to be part of these discussions was publicly questioned by no less than James Arbuthnot, MP, Conservative chairperson of the Commons defence committee and a former Defence Minister.<sup>4</sup>

The existing Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) has been in place for many years and its progress has been described as slower than 'glacial' by Steve Hucklesby, Policy Advisor for the Methodist Church on the World Council of Churches.<sup>5</sup> The nuclear states have used NPT as a fig leaf. Steve Hucklesby describes the progress of the NPT in these terms: 'Although the Conference on Disarmament meets for three sessions each year spanning a total of 24 weeks, no programme of work has been agreed for the past 17 years'.<sup>6</sup> This treaty has been unable to deliver non-proliferation or further disarmament. There are still an estimated 17,000 nuclear warheads in our world.<sup>7</sup>

This total is undoubtedly a big improvement from the 1986 global stockpile peak of

over 70,000 nuclear warheads.<sup>8</sup> However, nuclear states continue to ignore the majority voice of the other non-nuclear nations. For many years many countries have been calling for a worldwide ban on nuclear weapons, consistent with the successful international bans on chemical and biological weapons. And, following the latest conference on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons in Vienna, the Austrian government pledged to lead an international campaign to ban nuclear weapons. Possibly the only headline in British newspapers about this positive development was entirely misleading. It declared simply: 'Risks of nuclear war rising, warn experts'.<sup>9</sup>

### **The idea of a deterrent**

No doubt there will be many people who will be greatly alarmed at any prospect of Britain being without its so-called nuclear 'deterrent'. They will point to the rise of Russian nationalism in the face of NATO expansion, the advent of IS, the lack of any immediate resolution to the stand-off between North and South Korea and the uncertainty about an agreement with Iran over its nuclear programme. That's not to mention the flash-point of Kashmir between the nations of Pakistan and India. There is the rising power of China. And finally there is the increasingly volatile situation of Israel.

Equally, it could be reasonably argued that the last thing this volatile world needs is a new nuclear arms race, which could be sparked by Britain renewing Trident. What is needed instead is a new international impetus towards nuclear disarmament, encouraged by popular pressure. Given the weight of international opinion which already exists in this direction, this is a viable alternative to nuclear weapons renewal. The Global Zero movement has already clearly outlined a detailed timetable for the process of international nuclear disarmament.<sup>10</sup>

Many people are understandably fearful of appearing defenceless in the face of the increasing insecurity of our world today. And our leading politicians are quick to both highlight this and to play on people's fears as a 'no-brainer' justification for renewing Trident. However, global insecurity is an even stronger argument for nuclear disarmament. The longer these weapons exist, the more likely that there will be some accident, misunderstanding or a case of terrorist sabotage. And, as pointed out in the Parliamentary debate in January, Trident is no defence against suicidal terrorists or even rogue states.<sup>11</sup>

If agreement on Trident renewal is rushed through Parliament without deeper or wider thought, our nation will be condemning our world to a future with nuclear weapons which will actually make our world less safe for generations to come. Not

only that, we will by 2020, be forced to commit 35% of our defence spending to a 20th century weapon that no civilised nation can ever justify using.<sup>12</sup>

One major controversy of the 2015 election revolves around the issue of how much the British people are effectively governed by Brussels, over the heads of our own Parliament—but a similar question needs to be raised about Washington. How much will any decision about renewing Trident be in reality governed by US foreign policy? At least the British people have some representation in the European Parliament, but what representation do British people have on Capitol Hill?

A Trident renewal expected by the US Defence Department will cripple the British people with a tax burden of an estimated £100 billion—a bill we cannot afford to pay for many years to come. Perhaps now is the time, when there is much scandal about tax evasion and unequal taxation, to renew the just cry of those first Americans: ‘No taxation without representation’. This call for liberty and independence should always find a resonance within the Baptist psyche, alongside the constant challenge to trust in God instead of worldly power.

I am certainly not convinced that we can simply trust our political leaders, whatever their nationality or political party, to make this decision about Trident for us. This conviction comes from observing how political elites are quick to use verbal trickery to conceal the truth. For example, our current Prime Minister, David Cameron, speaking from the despatch box, called Trident an ‘ultimate insurance policy’. My own MP called these weapons a ‘big stick’. These misleading analogies are not only an insult to the intelligence of the British people - they are also a desperate attempt to conceal the real nature of our weapons. The UK Trident weapons system is a multiple weapon of mass destruction. It is an instrument of genocide, of world slaughter.

In the preface of a recent landmark book, the President of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace made this observation: ‘Few, if any, top-tier issues attract as much simplistic analysis, as many verbal red-herrings, and as little serious work by governments as does the feasibility of nuclear disarmament’.<sup>13</sup>

Our governments have historically been very quick to resort to the language of ‘national security’ whenever Trident’s continued existence is questioned. But what our world requires is international security. And this will require a new social and political vision for our world, of the kind the bishops of the Church of England have recently called for. The veteran CND campaigner, Bruce Kent, toured Britain last year under the banner of ‘No Faith in Trident’. This statement suggests the repeated challenge of Jesus to his disciples: “Where is your faith?”. Do we trust in Trident to deliver us? Or do we trust in a God who chose in Jesus to lay down his life for the world, so that we might see a greater vision of a new world?

Last year, shortly after the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of WW1, some people in



my home town mounted a similar vigil to remember the genocide of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We were challenged by a passer-by as to why we were remembering the victims of these two particular atrocities. The answer was simple. Many more civilians died in an instant in those two cities than British and Commonwealth soldiers died during the first day of the Battle of the Somme, for example.

There are plans to mark the 70th anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August this year. It should come as a timely reminder to our political leaders between the formation of a new government and before the long-promised debate about the future of Trident. I hope that in the name of our world-embracing God, many Baptists will raise their voices about Trident in the run-up to this wide-open election. Even those who support Trident's renewal should join in calling for a genuine national debate.

So, the 2015 General Election provides our nation with a key litmus test of our democracy over Trident. This is a seminal moment, not just for the vital issue of the whether or not the UK will continue to threaten other countries with weapons of mass destruction in the future. It is also a critical test of the nature and future of British democracy itself.

'We are not fighting against humans, but against forces and authorities and against rulers of darkness and powers in the spiritual world' (Ephesians 6:12, CEV).

***Colin Cartwright is minister of Trinity Baptist Church, Chesham, Bucks.***

#### **Notes to text**

1. The Bishops' Open Pastoral Letter for the 2015 General Election, issued 17 February 2015.
2. *ibid.*, para 72.
3. <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/defence-and-security-blog/2015/jan/20>, accessed February 2015.
4. UK Foreign Office 'no-show' at international conference on nuclear weapons, published online by JPIT, 10 May 2014.
5. *ibid.*
6. *ibid.*
7. [www.theguardian.com/jan/20](http://www.theguardian.com/jan/20).
8. Global Zero Action Plan, February 2010, <http://www.globalzero.org>, accessed November 2014.
9. *The Independent*, Monday 8 December 2014, p1.
10. Global Zero Action Plan.
11. See also: Shannon Beebe & Mary Kaldor, *The ultimate weapon is no weapon*, Perseus Books, 2010.
12. [www.theguardian.com/jan/20](http://www.theguardian.com/jan/20).
13. Jessica T. Mathews in George Perkovich & James M. Acton (eds.) *Abolishing nuclear weapons: a debate*, Washington 2009.

# The pension problem

by Mark Hynes

**F**unding the deficit in the Baptist Pension Scheme is a serious financial challenge facing many of our churches. In this article, Mark Hynes, BPS Pensions Manager, responds to some of the most commonly asked questions.

## 1. What is the history of the Baptist Pension Scheme (BPS)?

The Baptist Union has long believed that it is important for Baptist ministers to have access to good quality pension provision. This led, in 1928, to the creation of the BPS (which was originally known as the Baptist Ministers Pension Fund, BMPF); although the earliest pension provision for ministers was as long ago as 1875, when annuities of £45 per year became payable to care for ministers in retirement.

The exact structure of the BPS altered over the years, but in essence it was always a form of defined benefit (DB) scheme. This type of pension arrangement (also known as a final salary scheme) is a promise to pay the retired minister a pension based on his, or her final salary.

Since 2000, the cost of providing DB pensions has increased dramatically and following two detailed formal consultations (in 2009 and 2011) with employers and members, the DB scheme was closed at the end of 2011 and replaced by a new defined contribution (DC) scheme. Details of the consultations and the associated documentation can be found on the BPS website at <http://www.baptistpensions.org.uk/useful-documents/consultation-2011-information/>.

## 2. Why has the cost of providing final salary pensions increased so much?

A number of factors have come together to create a 'perfect storm' for DB schemes.

- There has been a sustained period of economic turmoil and inconsistent investment returns.
- Record low interest rates have greatly increased scheme liabilities (the projected cost of providing the promised pensions rises when interest rates are very low, as they are today).
- On average, people are living longer, so the pension cost rises.
- Successive governments have placed increasing obligations on employers participating in DB schemes, to ensure that all schemes are adequately funded.

These issues affect all DB schemes, not just the BPS. In fact, so severe is the challenge that DB schemes are now almost extinct outside the public sector. Below are some recent press headlines:

‘Now even John Lewis curbs final salary pension scheme’ (February 2015)

‘Zurich Insurance to close DB schemes’ (November 2014)

‘Tesco scraps final salary scheme’ (January 2015)

Most private sector DB schemes, including the BPS, are now in deficit (there are insufficient funds to pay for the estimated future pension payments). Schemes run by our fellow Christian denominations in the Church of England, the Church of Scotland, the Methodists and the URC are also grappling with DB pension deficits. A report in February 2015, from the consultant JLT Employee Benefits, estimated the total deficit for all UK private sector DB schemes at over £250bn—a major turnaround from the 1980s and 1990s when many DB schemes were in surplus. In fact, the BPS itself was in surplus as recently as the 2001 scheme valuation.

### **3. What does pension law say about deficit funding?**

The law relating to DB pensions is very complex, but essentially, it requires the employer to honour the promise it made to the scheme member, even though the cost of that promise has dramatically increased. Therefore, where a DB scheme is in deficit, the employer has to make up any shortfall

Although it is acknowledged that this places a significant and unexpected financial burden on employers, successive governments, over many years, have chosen as far as possible, to protect the members’ right to the pension he or she was promised as part of their service to the employer.

### **4. How can a church deal with its responsibility for deficit funding?**

There are two possible ways for a church to deal with its responsibility for deficit funding.

First, it can pay its full ‘employer debt’ and have no further liability to the scheme. The employer debt for a given church is, broadly speaking, its own share of the pension deficit. It is based on an assessment of a church’s past participation in the DB scheme. The calculation format is set out in law and is complex, but as a general rule, the more ministers a church has employed who were members of the scheme and the longer their period of service, the higher the employer debt is likely to be.

Secondly, As an alternative to paying the full employer debt, the church can make monthly deficiency contributions, as required by the scheme recovery plan. The recovery plan is agreed with the Pensions Regulator and is regularly reviewed. The level of deficiency payments may go up or down in the future, depending on how the

financial position of the scheme changes. Payments will be required for many years. Currently, monthly deficiency contributions are a flat percentage of pensionable income (11%) and the monthly payment is not directly linked to the employer's exposure to the scheme.

Not all churches will necessarily have the option of dealing with the deficit by making monthly deficiency payments. In some circumstances, where a church has had a cessation event, it may be required, by law, to pay its full employer debt.

The detailed law relating to cessation events is beyond the scope of this short article, but it is very important for each church to understand the position. You can find out more on the BPS website at <http://www.baptistpensions.org.uk/content/pages/documents/1377765901.pdf> (particularly pp4 and 12-14).

#### **5. What steps have been taken by the BPS to reduce the deficit?**

The most significant action was to close the DB scheme and replace it with a Defined Contribution scheme from 1 January 2012. This means that no future service liabilities are being incurred on a DB basis. The challenge of eliminating the deficit on service up to 31 December 2011 remains and as mentioned in Q4 above, this will be achieved through the payment of deficiency contributions and full employer debts.

#### **6. Why do individual Baptist churches bear the cost of funding the deficit?**

It is a core tenet of Baptist life, that each church is fully independent. Each church is responsible for calling and employing its own minister. Consequently, under pension law, each church is an individual employer in the DB scheme and is individually responsible for its own share of the pension deficit.

The effect of the Employer Debt Regulations 2005, is to make those employers which employed a member of the DB scheme at any time between 2 September 2005 and 31 December 2011 responsible for BPS deficit funding.

#### **7. Are the payments required from each church fair?**

The employer debt calculation is fair in that it directly links to the service a church has received from members of the DB scheme. Churches wanting to pay off the employer debt may be able to obtain a loan from the BU Corporation for this purpose.

As mentioned in Q4 above, there is no such direct link to exposure to the scheme, in the setting of the monthly deficiency contributions. Consequently, some employers have felt that their contributions are disproportionately large, but this was the best arrangement that could be reached with the Pensions Regulator in 2011. Other alternatives would have been unworkable at the time and even less palatable to most churches. However, the Pension Trustee promised that, as part of the 2013 actuarial valuation of the scheme, it would consider whether monthly deficit contributions could more accurately reflect

the liabilities of each employer, particularly those with only a short length of exposure to the scheme. An announcement about this will be made as part of the publication of the 2013 valuation results.

**8. My church no longer employs a minister. Why do we have to pay?**

As mentioned in Q6, the churches responsible for deficit funding are those which employed a scheme member at any time between 2 September 2005 and 31 December 2011. The church is still responsible even if it no longer employs a minister today. Nor does the law take account of the church's current financial circumstances in allocating liability. This can lead to some very difficult situations for individual churches.

For example, some churches have been much larger in the past than they are today. They may have a long history of employing ministers who were members of the BPS, but no longer have the financial resources to pay for a minister (or perhaps only have enough money to sustain part time ministry on a shared basis with other churches), yet are required to pay significant additional pension deficit contributions in respect of past ministerial service. Since each church is an independent organisation, it is unfortunately, responsible for meeting its own pension obligations.

The Pension Trustee recognises the scale of the problem facing many churches and will do whatever it can to help each church find a manageable solution. However, the obligation is imposed on the church by legislation, and the Trustee has no discretion to ignore it. There is therefore only limited assistance that the Trustee is able to offer each church.

**9. The law seems very burdensome. Can't we lobby the government for legal change?**

This government's view is that the employer must keep its promise to provide the members' pensions. Earlier governments have taken the same stance.

There is some recognition that the issue of deficit funding is particularly challenging for small employers and the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) is aware of the problems faced by churches and other not-for-profit organisations. However, there is no sign of any imminent change to the law and even if the position does change in the future, the matter of past liabilities still needs to be addressed. Representatives of the BPS and BUGB have had several meetings with the DWP to consider pension issues and will continue to influence government policy where they can.

**10. Are there any other solutions?**

One thing that may merit further exploration is whether the Baptist family as a whole can come together to develop a joint solution, perhaps through the creation of something like a pension reserve fund, or an arrangement where stronger churches in a local area support their weaker brethren. This might help to provide some assistance to struggling churches in certain circumstances.

This is something that would need to be led by the churches, the Associations and the Union working together. It cannot be driven by the Pension Trustee which must, because every church is independent, deal with each one individually and on a consistent basis, in accordance with pension law.

However, while some ways to help struggling churches may be developed, the reality is that although with the faithful support of the scheme churches (and other employer organisations) we are addressing the deficit problem, the economic environment remains very unfavourable, many challenging issues still need to be resolved and we have a long race to run.

Every church generation and leadership has its own particular crises to face. Fulfilling the pension promise made to our past ministers is one that has fallen to us to address. It will require perseverance, prayer, creativity, generosity and God's grace to get us to the finishing line.

If you want to know more about the DB scheme, please have a look at the BPS website <http://www.baptistpensions.org.uk/the-closed-defined-benefit-db-plan>.

For a non-Baptist perspective, the Charity Commission website gives some helpful guidance: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defined-benefit-pension-schemes-questions-and-answers>.

***If you have any questions about the pension scheme, then please feel free to contact Mark Hynes, Pensions Manager.***

### ***The Baptist pension crisis***

*Mike Smith wrote a letter to bmj expressing his anxieties about the Baptist pension crisis, reproduced below. Mark Hynes has covered many of the questions raised by Mike in the article above.*

This communication arises from the Yorkshire Baptist Ministers' Fellowship meeting on 6 October 2014 at Leeds. It tries to face a most serious threat to the witness to Christ and the whole work of our denomination. It seems that the true implications of this crisis have not been fully communicated to the churches, and many of the smaller churches especially are facing grave concerns.

I do not propose to delve into the history of the Baptist Pension Scheme. When I was a newly accredited minister in the 1970s, membership of the scheme was not

compulsory. Several of us in Rochdale took advice from an actuary. We were told that the scheme was badly funded and likely to fail. Accordingly, we made other pension plans, and I myself have never drawn any money from the Fund!

As time went by, membership of the Fund was made compulsory for new ministers who wanted to be accredited. Was this step taken because even back then worries about the Fund were starting to surface? And were there any remedial actions planned or taken at this time?

Over the years, the number of Baptist ministers has dropped. At the same time, the number of retired ministers has increased. Was any consideration given to this fact? It should have been noticed that an imbalance between income and expenditure was appearing, and was likely to get worse. Was any thought taken as to how to remedy this?

In the past few years, churches have quite suddenly been faced with a demand for £3000 per church per year to begin to cover the deficiencies of this Fund. I am aware that the Fund is a separate organisation from the Baptist Union. But surely the Union should have been kept aware of the growing problems with the Fund. Also, how does it fit with Baptist ethos that £3000 per church is demanded, rather than a request as for Home Mission? What sort of consultation with the churches was there?

For small churches especially, the demand for £3000 is a very heavy burden. It can easily mean the difference between affording a minister or not! It could actually mean that a small church would become bankrupt, and have to close. How does this fit with the exhortations we regularly receive 'to be missional'? And it is worth mentioning that any £3000 would not come from some anonymous investment fund, but from the sacrificial giving of church members, many of whom may be on low wages or fixed incomes.

Furthermore, is it fair that all churches are expected to pay the £3000? Is it right that such a sum should be demanded both from a church of 20 members, and from a church of 200—bearing in mind that often churches with a small membership may be in missionally significant areas.

An even more pressing question is this. If £3000 is demanded this year, what guarantee is there that the sum may not be increased next year?! Making good a deficiency from the past may be a worthy aim, but it should not be done to the danger and detriment of many churches.

It should also be asked: why should groups of small churches that together can employ only one minister be asked for a sum of £3000 from each church? Speaking personally, I am a member of a group of three churches, with an income of around

£34,000. The deduction of £9000 from our income would leave us very close to not being to afford a minister at all. Where is the justice in this?

I have just heard from our church treasurer that for this year the demand for £3000 has now risen to £3050. Is this the shape of things to come? And what guarantee have we that another £50 or £100 might be added on?

What is to be done about this catastrophic situation? Doing nothing is not an option. This situation is not the fault of the churches. Church treasurers have struggled over the years to balance church accounts. They have done great service to the cause of Christ by prudent watching over the church's money. But it is the individual churches that are now being expected to pick up the tab for this atrocious mess.

The bleak scenario of what will happen to Baptists if nothing is done is almost too awful to contemplate. Many of our smaller churches will have to close, as they cannot cope with increasing payments to bail out the Pension Fund. Many others will no longer be able to afford paid ministry, with disastrous consequences for the work for Christ. Our whole denomination will face being decimated. It will be reduced to a few of the larger churches, mainly in the south, who have been able to keep up with the ever-increasing payments demanded by the Pension Fund. Numbers of Baptist ministers will be so reduced that only one college will be needed to train them. They will actually become an endangered species. Indeed, Baptists as a whole will just become a historical curiosity, on a par with Novatianists, Muggletonians and Sandemanians!

When the whole problem of the Pension Fund has been raised, it has been said in reply that the Fund is not the responsibility of the Baptist Union. Legally, this may be true. BUT morally, the Baptist Union has to bear some responsibility. It is also said that this is merely the 'law of the land'. But surely, bad laws can be challenged, and negotiations can take place. With governments increasingly looking to the private sector to help in all kinds of social work, this starts to provide us with arguments for an alteration to this burdensome scheme to which we are told we are legally bound.

I am not naming names or seeking to apportion blame. My sole concern is for the mission of Jesus Christ, and the freedom of Baptist churches to devote all their energies to this. I do not want this paper to become just one more complaint, to be filed away and gather dust in some forgotten office. We need action on this desperately pressing situation now. Otherwise, the bleak scenario I outlined above will soon be reality.

***Mike Smith is retired from formal Baptist ministry. He lives, and continues to serve in various ways, near Huddersfield.***



## Alternative creed: responses

**B**rian Oman's alternative creed, offered in January's *bmj*, has prompted two interesting responses from our readers, printed below. If you didn't see it and would like to, or if you'd like to write your own creed, contact the editor on [revsal96@aol.com](mailto:revsal96@aol.com).

### ***Ted Hale writes...***

Brian prompted me to sit down and try to put my own 'creed' in brief form. It only took me about half an hour, and I am sure that I could revise and re-revise it—but occasionally perhaps it is best to express the spontaneous thoughts which come first!

So here it is (though, as a traditional, Bible-shaped Baptist, I am actually not comfortable with any creeds, which become dogmatic and so have the potential to limit the Spirit's capacity to 'blow' where and as he will!)...

*I believe we are right when we are in awe of the greatest of all mysteries which (in English) we refer to as God.*

*I believe the essence or Spirit of this great mystery is found wherever there is love and humility.*

*I believe the teaching and example of Jesus was, and will always remain a challenge to allow sacrificial love to shape the lives of individuals, of families, of communities, of nations, of churches—and my own life*

*I believe we have all failed to put the pattern of Jesus' life first. Things like titles, possessions, fear, jealousy, a desire for success, all divert us from following Jesus' way.*

*I believe a church should offer inclusive companionship to anyone; and inspired by the example of Jesus try to be a community of honest friends who respond faithfully and generously to the needs of any powerless, marginalised, impoverished or sick people.*

*I believe the Bible is about life in all its fullness, with telling insights into the always flawed human story of people who believed they belonged to God. They often erred in their relationship with God, but they remained people whom God loved. For this reason the Bible is a supreme source of hope. This hope is most fully expressed in the stories of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.*

***Ted Hale is a past chairperson of BMF and lives in Northampton.***

### **Simon Woodman writes....**

In response to Brian Oman's challenge, I offer the following—it is a poem, nothing else.

*God help me, I do not believe...*

*I do not believe in God the Father.*

*I do not believe in a virgin birth.*

*I do not believe in three wise men, choirs of angels, or singing shepherds.*

*I do not believe in a reanimated corpse.*

*I do not believe that praying changes God, or his mind.*

*I do not believe in eternal damnation, or in hell as the eternal destiny of the faithless.*

*I do not believe in heaven as the eternal destination of the faithful.*

*I do not believe that Jesus will come again.*

*I do not believe people are called to do anything.*

*I do not believe in a God of war, violence, hatred or division.*

*I do not believe in a God who is angry, vicious, vengeful, or wrathful.*

*I do not believe eternal life is the spiritual equivalent of a final salary pension scheme; a person's state of grace at the point of death is not the ultimate determination of their eternal soul.*

*I do not believe that on the cross Jesus died to pay the price for my sins.*

*I do not believe that speaking in tongues is the indicator of the Spirit's presence.*

*I do not believe you have to be 'born again' to be saved.*

*I do not believe in original sin.*

*I do not believe the Bible is the word of God. If you want God's words in written form, read the Koran.*

*I do not believe that marriage must be between one man and one woman.*

*I do not believe in 'creation', with or without an 'ism'.*

*I do not believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.*

*But I do still believe, God help me...*

*I believe that God is the mother and father of us all, the ground of our being, and the source of all that makes us human.*

*I believe that God is love, and that in God there is no darkness at all.*

*I believe in resurrection through Christ Jesus, and that death does not get the final word on life.*

*I believe that those who are in Christ are daily born again from above.*

*I believe in hell as a present reality; as, I suspect, do the countless multitudes who find themselves trapped there.*

*I believe that idolatry is the root cause of all sin, and that wherever God is displaced from the centre of the cosmos, the path to hell opens before us.*

*I believe that through Christ's body people are redeemed from hell and released from Satan's power.*

*I believe that the eternal value of a person's life does not depend on their appreciation of their own eternal worth.*

*I believe that God is most fully and uniquely revealed in the person of Christ, and that those who know Christ, know God.*

*I believe that the Spirit of Christ is with all those who follow him, revealing him in and through those who bear faithful witness to him.*

*I believe that Christ died to save humanity from the twin powers of sin and death.*

*I believe that prayer changes everything, starting with me.*

*I believe that people are called to be, and then to live out that calling.*

*I believe that the kingdom of heaven is an in-breaking reality of transformation.*

*I believe that Jesus comes again, and again, and again.*

*I believe in the possibility of peace, and that peace is a blessing to the world.*

*I believe that the cross is God's nonviolent embrace of humanity, and that all human violence finds its end at the cross of Christ.*

*I believe that speaking in tongues is a gift of the Spirit; freeing our minds from the trammels of rational thought to commune with God's Spirit in ways too deep for words.*

*I believe the Bible offers a revelation of God's truth, and that it does so through a series of thought experiments concerning the existence of humanity before God.*

*I believe in marriage as an expression of loving, faithful, equal, covenant commitment, between two people, for the blessing of all.*

*I believe that the earth is a gift, and that we have a responsibility before God to tend it care-fully.*

*I believe that wherever the new humanity in Christ are present, the old humanity under death is challenged, and people are offered transformation to life in all its fullness.*

*In heaven's name, and for goodness' sake, so help me God, I do believe.*

**Simon Woodman is minister at Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church.**

## Pilgrim's progress

by Geoffrey Griggs

I was interested last April to read Michael Jackson's observations in *bmj*, entitled *Ministry—the way we were*. The following instance subsequently came to my mind and, on reflection, I wondered if we might really have lost something from the way we were.

I am now retired, but I often find myself being invited to conduct worship at churches that for one reason or another might have no minister on a particular Sunday. A while ago I was asked to lead at a particular church, only to find on arrival that they were in the middle of a power cut on that Sunday morning. This led to a number of expected—and unexpected—consequences.

First, the organ (electrically powered) was completely out of action. 'What about the piano standing in the corner?' I enquired. That, too, was powered—so no joy there. Secondly, as it was February and the morning was rather dull we really needed the regular lighting to see what we were supposed to be doing.

Thirdly, the church had (like many others I imagine) moved with the times and the hymns and Bible readings were now all 'on screen' via PowerPoint. The books had long been consigned to another place. Ergo, no hymns and no scripture text either because that also was on the same system; and anyway, the overhead screen could not be used as it was powered as well.

And, of course, being February, the church premises were cold because the electric heating

was also out of action.

The resolution of this situation was that after a short search, the deacons managed to retrieve a box of somewhat dusty hymn books (*ca* 1960) from the back of a cupboard. I had a Bible with me as usual and a motley variety of half used, left-over Christmas candles gave us a certain degree of lighting. As music was not possible we sang unaccompanied—with fairly mixed results. I preached from a reading desk feeling a little bit like John Wesley might have felt, flanked by two flickering candles that threatened at one point to immolate me and my notes in one go—but the crisis passed. Ultimately, we worshipped God and at the point of the final 'amen' the power was suddenly restored and the lights came on. (Perhaps there is a parable there.)

While we were able to manage that particular incident and the service went as planned, (after a fashion) it left me thinking a little more about 'the way we were'. What have we lost? Certainly there have always been power cuts and no doubt there will be more in the future, but while we can now access a huge range of hymns far beyond anything our forebears could ever have imagined through the medium of the computer, the scriptures can be shown on an overhead screen in any version the preacher pleases, and all sorts of illustrations and other facilities are available for the asking, there is nothing in the pew (or chair as you wish) while the worshipper waits for the service to begin.

After the service, several people said how much they missed being able to browse through the hymnbook prior to worship, and similarly, they missed the use of a pew Bible. Some recalled occasional weekday events when, fortified with coffee and cake, they would have what one termed a 'musical evening' trying to sing some of the more obscure or little used hymns in the book that were rarely sung (probably for a very good reason I imagine). Occasionally though, something good might be unearthed and it would be taken into the congregational repertoire of hymns.

Now, as a part of the price of progress, everyone was confined to whatever the preacher selected, and there was no opportunity to learn anything new because nobody actually knew what was available on the 'system', and had no access to a hymn book any longer to see for themselves!

In one instance, because of eyesight problems and screen 'glare', one individual confided that he couldn't actually see what was on the screen anyway and simply gave up. Others spoke of once being able quietly and privately to read a hymn from the book before a service started—simply for reflection; now, with no hymn books available, a level of social chatter and gossip simply rose up and occupied the pre-service time until the minister entered and worship began. There could be little or no 'atmosphere' in such circumstances.

Those who wanted to follow the Bible reading had to bring their own copies and, when the time for the reading came in the service order, the screen version rarely matched the personal copy held so it was not always possible to follow the reader. Well,

perhaps sometimes it is beneficial to simply listen, but many still like to follow the text.

Equally, midweek Bible studies that had once informed or had perhaps led to discussion or questions were now pre-prepared on PowerPoint and everyone simply listened and/or watched. A 'printout' of the study was available afterwards if one could not attend at a particular time of the week.

I returned home from my appointment on that February morning perhaps a little subdued; there was a feeling that I had unwittingly scratched an old sore in the fellowship.

Computers, laptops and PowerPoint have put a huge resource into the hands of those privileged to lead worship. But I wondered if perhaps we use such resources not because we strictly need to, but because, well, they are there and the technology exists. It's a part of our 'cool' credentials and if some do fall by the wayside or cannot keep up with progress.

In the meantime though, could we perhaps get the regular church meetings moved to Twitter? The deacons' meetings perhaps? The technology is there and we should be using it—or is there something after all about 'the way we were' and we have now lost it?

I felt a little sad as I drove home that Sunday morning.

***Geoffrey Griggs retired from Ramsden Belhouse church in 2012 and lives in Chelmsford.***

### ***South Australia house and car swap***

Retired Baptist minister and his wife in South Australia are seeking a house and car swap for 8-9 weeks, March-May, 2017. This time of year is autumn in Australia and the climate is temperate.

We have a pleasant house in the coastal town of Encounter Bay near Victor Harbour. Adelaide is an hour's drive away. The Fleurieu Peninsula is one of the most pleasant wooded hills areas of Australia. The vineyards of McLaren Vale and Langhorne Creek are half-an-hour away. The Heysen walking trail passes close by.

# Reviews

edited by John Goddard

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***The games people play: theology, religion and sport***

by Robert Ellis

Wipf & Stock

**Reviewer: Simon Oxley**

As someone whose diary is dominated by football fixtures as well as churchy appointments, an exploration of the interface between theology and sport sounded like a good idea: and so it proved to be—but if you simply want a source of sport-related illustrations for sermons, or advice on using sport as a means of evangelism, this is not the book for you.

Here is a rigorous theological reflection on sport, based around research on participants and supporters on either side of the Atlantic. Sport is a significant cultural phenomenon in our society and, therefore, theologically, something to be taken seriously. Simply to instrumentalise sport for the purposes of mission is to miss something significant, as Ellis illustrates. However, those who are called to sports chaplaincy or evangelism will find the book useful to stimulate their own reflections.

Ellis examines the role of sport in society and then offers an historical overview of

the relationship between sport and religion. He speculates that people today may turn to sport as well as religion to express feelings, construct identity and participate in ritual. Ellis explores the difference between play and sport. Play isn't just about leisure activity but is central to human being. Participation in creative play could be said to be participation in the play of God. He suggests that we can describe religious experience under five headings: mystical, charismatic, regenerative, communal and nurturing, many of which are shared in varying degrees by participants in sport. Sport could be said to be bureaucratised play, but it is also about striving and competing against an opponent. This raises the question of what winning or victory means for us in God.

Ellis' argument is rich, detailed and not subject to summary in a short review without distorting it. Even if you are not interested in sport, it is worth reading as theological reflection.

***Christianity in a nutshell***

by Leonardo Boff

Orbis Books, 2013

**Reviewer: Rosa Hunt**

I was walking down a street in Amsterdam with another Baptist recently and we passed a stall offering leaflets entitled *What the Bible really says*. My friend commented: 'I never pick up anything like that, because I know that I wouldn't agree with it unless I had written it myself...'

This is of course the problem with any book entitled *Christianity in a nutshell*. This short volume (119 pp) is a synthesis of Leonardo Boff's theology, which he has worked out over 40 years. With his reputation as a liberation theologian who insisted on a lived spirituality, and one with a passion for the redemption of the whole of creation, we would not expect Boff's synthesis of Christianity to be a purely academic treatise, or indeed a three-point explanation of how we can be saved, followed by the Sinner's Prayer in an appendix!

And we are not disappointed. Boff's synthesis covers a grand cosmological sweep, starting with the divine mystery of Godself, and taking us through the Big Bang and the moment of creation seen as the work of the foundation energy which emerges from the trinitarian Godhead. Boff sees this energy at work in the evolution of the galaxies and eventually in the appearance of Earth. All this is part of project *homo sapiens*: the emergence of the human being as bearer of self-consciousness and the perceiver of the mystery which is God. At some point in this anthropogenesis, one of the persons of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, pitched its tent in Miriam of Nazareth, and she conceived a son who is *capax infiniti*, 'the Word by which Mystery leaves behind its hidden character and makes itself known'.

In this vein, Boff continues to explore the nature of the reign of God in Jesus through looking at the practice of

liberation, the Lord's Prayer, Jesus' ethic of unlimited love and mercy, the death of the liberator on the cross and the resurrection as anticipation of the eschaton. All this is done from a global and sometimes even cosmic viewpoint, and always from an eschatological yearning for the future when there will be 'resurrection...love and celebration of those set free within a rescued creation...transfigured by the energies of the new heaven and the new earth, made into the temple where we and Trinity-God will dwell for endless ages'.

Some who have never before explored beyond the bounds of western evangelical Christianity may find this way of expressing our faith just a little too strange, but I found my thoughts stretched and challenged by this inspiring book. Don't buy it if you want a standard baptismal preparation course, but if you know someone who is interested in 'spirituality' this book might be an excellent way of introducing our Trinitarian faith and the unique claims of Jesus.

***Faith unraveled: How a girl who knew all the answers learned to ask questions***

*by Rachel Held Evans*

*Zondervan*

**Reviewer: John Goddard**

I thoroughly enjoyed reading *Faith unraveled*. (And yes, that is how unravelled is spelt in the US. And yes,



that is how spelled is spelt in the UK!) It's wonderful when you come across that perfect combination of someone who is a gifted writer who also has something to say. Rachel Held Evans is a fresh voice in the 'popular yet serious' genre of Christian publishing. Originally titled *Evolving in Monkey Town*, this autobiographical reflection on learning to question faith when your faith journey begins in a conservative evangelical Christian culture is fascinating, amusing, poignant and helpful.

The author grew up in Dayton, Tennessee, which in 1925 was home to the infamous (and somewhat contrived...) Scopes Monkey Trial—an argument between fundamentalists and modernists over the appropriateness of teaching evolution in schools. Growing up and being educated there in the late 20th century, she writes about her faith journey through what some of her detractors would have termed 'backsliding' and doubt, into a newer/older/fresher way of being a Christian.

She comments, 'Doubt is a difficult animal to master because it requires that we learn the difference between doubting God and doubting what we believe about God. The former has the potential to destroy faith; the latter has the power to enrich and refine it. The former is a vice; the latter a virtue'. This is good stuff, but it is far from being a dry academic thesis. The

description of the East Tennessee practice of Judgment Day is disturbingly funny, and throughout there is an honesty and openness which is refreshing.

It is not always a comfortable read, with observations like 'Some Christians are more offended by the idea of everyone going to heaven than by the idea of everyone going to hell...' But surely there is much to be gained by wrestling with these issues. Some of the extremes of this book might be peculiar to a particular US context, but there was much that rang true from my own faith journey.

*Faith unraveled* is subtitled *How a girl who knew all the answers learned to ask questions*. It's a great subtitle, and a vital skill for the contemporary church. We can't simply defend our territory and tradition for all we are worth—we need to evolve. Read and enjoy!

I would happily mention *Faith unraveled* in the same breath as Rob Bell's *Velvet Elvis* and Brian McLaren's *A new kind of Christian*—two of my favourite books of recent years. And we don't have long to wait for her next offering! *Searching for Sunday: loving, leaving, and finding the church* will be published in April 2015, and I've just received an advance copy of the PDF from the publisher Thomas Nelson. That's my next review for *bmj* sorted...

***The pioneer gift: explorations in mission***

*by Jonny Baker & Cathy Ross (eds)*

Canterbury Press

**Reviewer: Bob Little**

It's said that Aidan, the Iona-based 7th century missionary and 'ordained pioneer', would always ask people, 'Do you know about Jesus?' A negative answer provoked evangelism. A positive answer provoked the comment, 'Then let me show you how to love him more'.

This book—a collection of 12 substantial essays by different writers—explores ordained pioneer ministry today particularly, but not exclusively, within the context of the Anglican and Methodist communions. It includes one Baptist voice: that of Emma Nash.

The first of the essays defines a pioneer as someone who sees and imagines different possibilities to the way things are now—and builds a pathway to turn this potential into reality. Pioneer ministry means doing things differently: challenging convention, tearing up what exists and starting again. Being a pioneer requires urgency, imagination, energy—and sound theological grounding.

This book sets out to provide such a grounding—*via* the thoughts and research of practitioners and theologians in the pioneer movement. These focus on emerging trends, practices and key theological challenges. Among other things, they explore how humans experience transformation; examine

contextual engagement, and dissent as a form of leadership; look at emerging patterns of urban ministry; discuss whether the language of sin and guilt works today, and challenge assumptions about how pioneer ministry is learned.

Each essay provides a fascinating but challenging insight. Pioneers bring to the church a multifaceted gift that can embrace the prophetic and the mystic. They're both visionaries and activists. It doesn't guarantee popularity.

This book has much to contribute to enhancing the church's reach and health but its ideas and conclusions can be daunting. It's not for the faint-hearted—but, then, following Christ and helping to build his church is never easy, as experience and this book illustrates.

***Creative ideas for ministry with the aged: liturgies, prayers, and resources***

*by Sue Pickering*

Canterbury Press, 2014

**Reviewer: John Matthews**

This book is intended primarily, but not only, for those who are new to what the author calls 'aged-care ministry'. It reflects the author's experience as a family member, Anglican priest, spiritual director, pastoral visitor and chaplain to a retirement community in New Zealand. It expresses her belief that the core work of ministry is to care for people's souls, and to help them to know that they are loved by God who created them and will welcome them home.

She has many creative suggestions for (liturgical) services in care homes, which have led me to consider my own practice, but some assume that the people concerned are more able to concentrate and to participate than those where I lead services. Similarly, some of her other services may well work in a retirement community but would not do so in homes where many people have dementia. The same applies to much of the material intended to facilitate spiritual conversation in a group setting, though some of this would be very usable in church groups of older people.

The text is interspersed with questions intended to make the reader reflect on their own beliefs or practices, stories,

poems, and boxes containing practical suggestions. Quotations are fully referenced in footnotes at the bottom of the page. There is a bibliography and a list of books for further reading. The complete text of the book is on an accompanying CD-Rom, which allows the copying of services and includes colour versions of illustrations, which are in black and white in the book.

There is much that is helpful in this book, including 'a note on dementia' which says a great deal in four pages. Although some of it may not be found useful by Baptist ministers, it is worth exploring, especially by those new to this area and those looking for new material in their ministry to older people.

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