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# The Baptist Ministers' Journal

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Editor: HAZEL SHERMAN

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The Baptist Ministers' Journal is the journal of the Baptist Ministers' Fellowship.

Details of the Fellowship can be found on the inside back cover

'The views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the Editorial Board'

# Editorial

News programmes during the week of writing this editorial have shown the discovery of yet another unmarked mass grave and also reported on a conference for relatives of murder victims. By the time this journal is being read other sufferings and initiatives will have been recognised.

We live in a world in which it seems that violence is endemic. Massacres and murders are among the staples of TV news. The question is debated as to whether it was 'ever thus' but is now exacerbated by the availability of a deadlier range of tools and skills, and more evident through mass media. Stories in the Hebrew Scriptures and tales of persecution from the early Church reveal that human expression has always been prone to violence as a means of settling dispute or responding to threat. And violence as entertainment has been seen before, by the crowds who flocked to the gladiators' contests in the Roman Empire, amongst others. Although other empires play different games, 'the Preacher' asserts that 'there is nothing new under the sun' (Eccl 1.9). But each generation has to respond to its own world. We are grateful to Graham Sparkes for drawing our attention to some Baptist thinking and initiatives as we seek to follow Jesus in a violent world.

Other pieces in this issue go on to reflect a common concern with appropriate response to the world in which we live. In our culture, this is a world which places high value on 'equal opportunity' yet does not always discern

between political correctness and personal value. Pieces on single people and the church and concerning children and the church remind us that as church we still have much to learn about living together.

'Lifelong learning' has become a popular phrase for continuing education, and this is an important part of ministerial formation, which only begins with a period of college training. Sabbatical and study leave matters are given particular emphasis in these pages.

Returning to a theme from the April 2003 issue, there has been little development or news concerning the 'employment status' of Baptist Ministers is concerned, though you will have noticed a report in a recent edition of 'Transform'. There has, however, been no further communication from Government other than a statement in the House of Commons that the Minister of State has received a report from the churches and faith representatives and is still reviewing the situation. It is interesting to discover that Baptists and Muslims share a range of concerns about ministry and service in and to the community of faith. **dmj**

"The question which is often put to me, 'Do you believe in God?', usually seems a superficial one. If it only means that there is an extra place in your head where God sits, then God is in no way an event which changes your whole life, an event from which, as Buber says of real revelation, I do not emerge unchanged. We should really ask, 'Do you live out God?' That would be in keeping with the reality of the experience."

*Dorothee Sölle*

# FOLLOWING JESUS IN A VIOLENT WORLD

## Graham Sparkes, Mission Adviser, BUGB, considers a Baptist response to the World Council of Churches' Decade to Overcome Violence

I was visiting a day care centre. In many ways the sights and sounds of children engaged in a variety of lively and colourful activities could have come from any number of primary schools in this country. True, the plastic toys had seen better days and the buildings were more basic than we are used to, but what really marked this place out was the pictures drawn by the children and stuck on the walls. Children draw what they see, giving expression to their experience of the world around them, and these children had used their felt tips and crayons to draw tanks and helicopter gunships, snipers with machine guns and buildings exploding. This was not Kettering or Kidderminster but Khan Younis, a town towards the southern end of the Gaza Strip.

Those pictures stay with me as a disturbing reminder of how living with violence is a normal, routine way of life for too many people in this world. Children grow up in the midst of war, terror and fear, knowing no other kind of reality, and so a culture of violence develops whose destructive force is passed on from generation to generation and infiltrates all aspects of human living.

But if places like Gaza are the most obvious and frightening examples of the existence of a culture of violence, it would be a dangerous mistake to ignore the evidence within our own society. A few basic statistics begin to reveal the violence that permeates the life of our communities.

- In 2001-02, the police recorded almost 813,000 incidents of violent crime.
- It is estimated that every 10 seconds someone in this country is injured as a result of domestic violence, and that on average a woman will be beaten 32 times before she seeks help.
- Since the death of Stephen Lawrence and the publication of the McPherson report, a further 19 people have died as a result of racially motivated attacks, and racial violence in general is reported to have massively increased.

- At 72,000, Britain has its highest prison population ever recorded, and half of those in prison are reconvicted within two years of release.

Yet, of course, even figures such as these do no more than scratch the surface of the problem. There is structural violence that maintains the deep divisions between rich and poor; there is the violence that dominates our media, such as chat shows designed to provoke hostility and drag people through the dirt; and there is the controlled and legitimised violence of weapons production and armed conflict. Our own society is dominated by a culture of violence.

### Confronting cultures of violence

When delegates to the eighth assembly of the World Council of Churches met in Harare in 1998, they recognised that one common feature of the various contexts from which they came was the presence of violence. They agreed to work together within and beyond the walls of the church to overcome violence and create a culture of peace, and so proposed a Decade to Overcome Violence (2001-2010). At its subsequent launch, the WCC Central Committee declared,

'We come together from the four

corners of the earth aware of the urgent need to overcome violence that pervades our lives, our communities, our world and the whole created order. We launch this decade in response to a deep yearning among our peoples to build lasting peace grounded in justice.'

So the invitation went out to member bodies of the WCC, including the Baptist Union of Great Britain, to seek ways of responding to this call to peacemaking.

At one level, those within BUGB who received this invitation found it hard to be excited about a designated decade, particularly one that made somewhat grandiose claims of overcoming violence! At another level, the WCC initiative clearly did resonate, and as the theme was taken up and explored, Baptists began to use the language of 'Following Jesus in a Violent World' to describe the challenge of the decade. It is language that is a little more humble in its claims, rooting our response to the culture of violence in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and emphasising our commitment to the continuing journey of discipleship. It is language that has caught the imagination, not only of many Baptists, but also of our ecumenical partners.

So for the last two or three years, with the support of the BUGB Council and a measure of co-ordination and encouragement from Myra Blyth and myself at Baptist House, a wide variety of Baptists have been working with this theme. We deliberately set ourselves against the idea of putting together a comprehensive programme and asking churches to buy into it; instead we have been far more concerned to affirm and resource what is already happening amongst us, and to create space for a continuing process of reflection and action to take place. The result has been a range of initiatives very largely from individuals

and congregations, who have been determined to do more than lament the spread of violence, and are committed to discovering what it means to follow Jesus in a violent world.

What follows are just three examples of the kind of initiatives that are taking place. There are many others – as has been evident when, at recent Assemblies, those sessions dealing with the threat of violence and the promise of reconciliation have been highlighted. Yet these alone reveal the seriousness with which Baptists are addressing the WCC message.

### **1 Theological Reflection**

It is impossible to ignore the link between religion and violence. The more extreme rhetoric surrounding the current 'war on terrorism' speaks of a militant Islam committed to violent 'jihad', and a crusading Christianity intent on achieving victory. Divine justification for violence is employed by all sides, leading to the inescapable conclusion that religion has as much to do with the cause of the problem as any possible solution.

It has always been so. We hardly need reminding of the violent stories that feature in the Bible – of rape and revenge, of military invasion and ethnic cleansing, of massacre and destruction, of murder and sacrifice. Sometimes God is responsible for this violence, and sometimes God gives permission for human beings to be violent. Always we are left with images that sit uneasily with a gospel message of peace, love and reconciliation.

One Baptist who has helped us wrestle with these issues is Steve Finamore, most notably in his Whitley Lecture of 2000-2001 entitled '*Violence, the Bible and the End of the World*'. Steve does not shrink from confronting us with the extent of the problem of violence, revealing the way in

which it is integral to our whole way of being human. He suggests that easy talk of overcoming violence is dangerous, for no culture is immune from violence and unless we face up to the truth of our own capacity for cruelty, there can be no way forward. Then, drawing on the influential thought of René Girard, Steve goes on to offer a critique of this prevailing culture rooted in the actions of Jesus. As the innocent scapegoat, Jesus refuses to participate in the violent cycle of revenge and retaliation that characterises human action, instead offering a prayer of forgiveness and articulating a vision of an alternative kingdom. Of course, that kingdom is yet to come in its fullness and so violence will continue to be an inevitable part of who we are and how we behave. Meanwhile the challenge for church communities is to follow Jesus in this violent world by modelling an alternative way of being and living.

If we are about overcoming violence, we need the kind of careful theological reflection present in Steve's writing. But he has done more than write, for over recent months he has brought together a number of ministers to reflect further on questions of faith and violence. A range of papers have been produced and discussed looking at such areas as worship and the Eucharist, Paul's attitude to political authority, the mission story of the church, the spread of end times literature, all from the perspective of the culture of violence. Some of these will form part of a theological consultation this summer, so enabling wider numbers to share in the task of thinking theologically about our calling to build peace.

## **2 Breaking the Silence**

A hundred years ago it was legal for a man to beat his wife provided he used a stick no thicker than his thumb. Times have changed - but not that much. Domestic

violence continues to be a grim reality for far too many women who, behind closed doors and hidden from view, have to endure abusive patterns of behaviour by men who want to control and humiliate. Perhaps most disturbing of all is the evidence that churches too often ignore the needs of victims, refusing to acknowledge that violence could go on in the homes of church members. It is treated as a taboo subject that cannot be discussed, and so there is the need to find ways of breaking the silence.

Baptists have been involved in pioneering work to begin to change hearts and minds within our own church communities and beyond. Beginning with the Clothesline Project, a moving visual display of t-shirts designed by survivors of abuse to bear witness to the violence they experienced, a variety of resources have now been produced in order to educate and equip ministers, pastoral workers and churches.

A key person in this has been Dr Jill Brown, who has worked with the BUGB Department for Research and Training in Mission to produce a set of leaflets and other materials as a guide to good practice. They provide guidance for those living with violence, guidance for those seeking to support someone living with violence, information about what the law says, reflections on why women put up with violence, and a charter for churches to adopt. In addition, Jill services a network of people within our churches who are concerned for and involved with this issue.

This is an immensely valuable piece of work requiring deep sensitivity. When faced with situations of abuse, the ease with which we use words such as 'forgiveness' and 'reconciliation' is quickly called into question, and we are forced to speak and act far more carefully in our

desire to follow Jesus in a violent world.

### 3 Criminal Justice

Towards the end of last year, a survey was undertaken in an attempt to discover some of the ways in which BUGB churches are engaging with issues of violence. The returns reveal some interesting facts, not least the extent to which many of our churches, in one way or another, are concerned to address the impact of crime on local communities.

Of course, the methods for doing so are very varied. Vandalism caused by young people has prompted a range of organised activities designed to keep them off the streets. Incidents of burglary and other crimes centred on the home have resulted in new steps to set up neighbourhood watch schemes. Links have been made with the local police, both to offer prayer and to give practical help. Prison visitor schemes have been set up, and drop-in centres have been opened. Victims of crime are given help, and courses in anger management are supported. All these locally based initiatives reflect a Baptist commitment to work towards overcoming the culture of violence, and while many will reflect the commitment of a few within a congregation, others clearly are seen as fundamental to the church's ministry and mission. We can note, for example, the close partnership that has developed between John Bunyan Baptist Church, Oxford, and the Youth Offending Team who have made the decision to place their

restorative justice unit on the church premises.

This wide variety of significant work deserves support and encouragement. So a consultation has been planned that aims to bring together representatives of some of the churches who responded to the survey, with one or two specialists also in attendance. The purpose is to allow stories to be told and experiences to be shared, both to better equip those already involved in this work, and to see how we might help other congregations who are looking to make a similar journey of engagement.

As with the other two examples, this is not the launch of a new programme. Rather, it is recognising and affirming work that is already going on, and encouraging it to grow and develop by building on the rich understanding and experience of individuals and communities committed to following Jesus in a violent world.

We live at a time of global conflict, when a war has been fought for reasons many of us found less than convincing. It is a time when we urgently need to rediscover the possibility of non-violent ways of resolving conflict, both internationally and within our own society, and when the witness of the Christian church for a counter-cultural way of peacemaking is crucial. As Baptists, we are finding adventurous ways of responding, and we must go on doing so. It is nothing less than a gospel imperative. **bmj**

"A preacher who is not open to new voices and new words... will shrivel up spiritually.

When Jesus began to speak with his Galilean drawl, and, worse yet, with sinners, prostitutes, the sick, tax collectors, and Samaritan women, he was accused of speaking in the name of Beelzebub, the prince of demons! His word was too strange for the ears of some of the Scribes and Pharisees. They were not able to invite this strange new word into their hearts...."

Brian J Pierce, O.P.

# Sabbaticals - What sort of break?

**Ian Millgate, Ministry Support Administrator, BUGB, reports and reflects on Sabbatical options.**

What do the following have in common - Willow Creek, Saddleback, Regent's Park College, IBTS Prague, India and a Manse? The answer is that they are all places where ministers choose to spend time while on sabbatical leave, along with a whole host more. Some stay home and study there, although that is not without its problems (not least the risk of interruption - "I know she's on sabbatical, but she won't mind *me* calling!"). This is often an option where there is a younger family, or where funds are very limited. Others go to one of the Colleges. Some ministers travel to the other side of the world.

Just as there are many locations, there are also an enormous number of types of subject covered. During my years as the person mainly responsible for administering the Baptist Union's sabbatical programme, the topics have fallen into about four main categories - although ministers always have the ability to surprise with imaginative new ways to spend the time. And that's great, provided the main purpose of a sabbatical is adhered to, that in one way or another it contributes to a minister's ongoing formation, to make him a better equipped servant of God and the Church.

## **Mission issues**

Probably more undertake study on issues relating to the mission of the church and its outreach into the community than on any other group of topics. A popular approach is to visit other situations similar to one's own. For example, a minister in a city-centre church would compile a list of other city centre churches, and as well as relevant reading would spend part of the sabbatical visiting the other churches in order to explore how they have met the challenge of being relevant to the 'parish'. The recent article in the Journal from Andy Bruce was the fruit of just such a sabbatical.

A number of ministers have taken the chance to learn in more detail about  
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particular mission programmes, such as *Purpose Driven Church* and the Willow Creek 'Seeker Service' approach. Their sabbatical period has afforded the opportunity not just to read but also to travel to experience the programmes first-hand in their place of origin.

Another popular topic is, in one guise or another, post-modernism, as ministers strive to come to terms with the thought-world in which we now live, so as to try to find culturally relevant ways to express the mission of the church and to be able to respond to those who reject the claims of Christianity from such a philosophical background.

## **Ministry Issues**

The lines are blurred, of course, between these categories, but some sabbatical subjects are more to do with the inner life of the church than its role in reaching out - and that isn't meant to be a criticism, because internal health is important for effective mission. For example, whereas quite a few ministers have taken study weeks to attend courses on conflict resolution and mediation, some have extended that study into the full length of a sabbatical. Another area that is considered from time to time is worship.

Pastoral needs that have arisen can be a source of guidance towards an



appropriate topic, as the sabbatical gives a busy minister time to look at a live issue in greater depth than is allowed amidst the demands of day to day ministry. For example, ministers have studied issues relating to marriage and contemporary attitudes, including the prevalence of cohabitation. The issue of teenage dropouts from church life is another matter that has been the focus of a sabbatical study. Other ministers have focussed on ministry to the bereaved, and quite a few have learnt about counselling.

Closely related to pastoral issues are practical questions arising from ministry. A notable example was when a minister had been asked by the architect for a building scheme "What do you want the building to say about God?" and was stimulated by that to research differing styles of church buildings and the implicit messages. Some ministers have taken the opportunity of sabbatical leave to update their skills in technology and multimedia, and how these can be used in the life and witness of the Church.

### **Theological Study**

For some ministers, the sabbatical offers the chance for the stimulus and refreshment that comes from deeper theological study. The topics within this category range far and wide. Learning about Celtic spirituality is popular, and several ministers have spent time studying Anabaptist teachings. An historical focus is another possibility, as for example when one minister looked back at the life of a notable predecessor in his church, and another studied a small denomination from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to which his family had belonged. Such studies usually have a concern to learn lessons from the past for the present world and church, rather than being simply academic and factual accounts.

Doctrinal issues, especially those arising from current concerns, also feature strongly

in this category. One minister compared aspects of the reformed tradition and the charismatic movement. Others have looked at the doctrine of the Trinity, the resurrection, the problem of suffering, the sovereignty of God - the list could go on and on, including more unusual topics, such as theology and film or theology and science fiction (that one contributed to Anthony Thacker's book on that subject).

For some, the theological refreshment has come from attending courses at a College, including the IBTS in Prague, which is always happy to receive requests from those who would like to spend a sabbatical there, as are Baptist Colleges here in the UK.

What is surprising is how rarely sabbaticals focus directly on Biblical themes, although naturally there is frequent reference to Scripture. Only occasionally do we hear of ministers taking subjects like "Leadership in Acts" or "Preaching in Isaiah" - or simply an in depth study of a book. Perhaps this springs out of a desire to be 'applied', but since the BU recommends that there should always be a subsidiary subject as well as the main topic, a focus on a particular part of Scripture, studied purely for ones own spiritual good, could feature much more frequently than it does, even if a minister felt she should take a main subject relating to the practice of ministry.

Very occasionally it has been possible to agree a sabbatical programme within the Union's scheme which has related to academic study, such as doctoral work. In this case, or where it is proposed to use a sabbatical for writing up study already undertaken, two conditions must be strictly fulfilled if a bursary is to be received from the Union - the minister must not already be receiving assistance from the Further Studies Fund, and there must be a clearly demonstrable relevance to ministry.

## Experiential sabbaticals


A few years ago the Ministry Executive Committee approved a broadening of the Union's sabbatical scheme, to allow for 'hands on' programmes as well as reading and study. These programmes usually involve travel, to experience some aspect of church life in another part of the world or to be involved in some form of service, such as a brief time overseas with BMS World Mission. Some ministers have led pilgrimages as part of their sabbatical. There is a long history of ministers taking their sabbatical as an exchange with a minister from somewhere else in the world - often the USA.

What is important under this broadening of the scheme is that there must be a clear demonstration that it contributes to a minister's ongoing development, and in all such experiential sabbaticals a minister is expected to write a theological journal, reflecting on what he has seen or done. If these conditions are not met (such as if an exchange involves very limited duties and is otherwise an extended holiday), it will not be possible to receive financial support from the Union. However, we are Baptists! - and if a church and minister agree on a sabbatical that does not fit the Union's scheme, they are quite at liberty to go ahead, as long as they understand that it does not attract a bursary.

## Making plans

This should happen as early as possible, for the benefit of both church and minister. Provided the plans do fit into the Union's

purposes, namely ongoing ministerial formation, a modest grant can be requested from the Ministry Department, from whom both explanatory leaflets and the application form are available. The scheme makes certain specifications about timing - the first sabbatical can be taken seven years after enrolment on the ministerial Register (which usually, but not always, means seven years from ordination) and subsequent sabbaticals are only available after seven years have passed since the last one (even if that was late). Also, no sabbatical can be supported within the last two years before the planned retirement date, although if one would be due a shorter break can be taken a little early. If this affects you, you should discuss this with the Ministry Department. A sabbatical must be at least one month long (otherwise you don't really get the benefit of a break) and should not last more than three months. With these provisos, a minister and church are quite free to determine the timing that suits them best.

We hope that this brief account of the huge variety of types of sabbatical - and this article is really just the tip of the iceberg - may encourage and inspire you to think about your own interests and needs. A sabbatical offers a time of refreshment, time to think, to gain new insights or to update your knowledge, and should send you back into ministry renewed and ready for the demands and challenges ahead. Don't miss out! 

Every now and then go away, have a little relaxation, for when you come back to your work your judgment will be surer. Go some distance away because then the work appears smaller and more of it can be taken in at a glance and a lack of harmony and proportion is more readily seen.

*Leonardo da Vinci*

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# Church for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Some 'Sabbatical fruits' from Rob Trickey, Woodside, Norwood, returning to his pastorate after a three-month period spent reading, discussing, meeting leaders, and visiting groups and projects in the UK and overseas.

At the start of this 21<sup>st</sup> century, I believe the church in Britain faces three huge challenges, such that we need to ask ourselves some uncomfortable questions:

## Change

We live in a rapidly changing world – however we feel about it, for good or bad, we are part of a culture that has gone into overdrive.

Three inter-related aspects can be identified:

**Scientific and technological developments**, whereby our capabilities are increasing at phenomenal rates, raising some profound ethical issues too (especially in the area of medicine and genetics). Perhaps the most far-reaching is the Internet, which offers great benefits and opportunities as well as presenting enormous challenges and significant dangers<sup>1</sup>.

**Cultural and philosophical shifts**, often labelled "postmodernism", the main features of which are by now familiar and readily observable: the rejection of institutions and external authority (including the notion of absolute truth); and a corresponding focus on the individual and the prizing of personal freedom and choice.

**The rise of consumerism** (brilliantly charted in the documentary series *The Century of the Self*), so that people expect to be able to choose just the right product from a wide range of options. Most advertisers are not encouraging us to buy a product for the first time, but rather to make sure we have the best and the one most suited to our needs. Comfort and convenience are primary values; wants become needs.

A final point about our current context is that as change happens faster, more of us are affected because more of us can remember when things were very different. Whereas it is traditionally the older generation who hark back to the good old days, the recent wave of seventies and eighties nostalgia suggests that thirty-somethings are feeling insecure too, maybe even experiencing premature mid-life crises.

SO: How can we live faithfully in such a context? How do we assess the changes that are taking place? How much of our technology-driven, postmodern, consumerist culture can we embrace and affirm? This is not just a matter of survival - Christian discipleship demands that we engage positively with our culture<sup>2</sup>.

## Leavers

It has been noted that Baptist churches generally seem to be holding their own in terms of church attendance; however, this relative success should not blind us to the fact that many people are leaving the church (including Baptist churches)<sup>3</sup>. I suspect too that there are many who still attend their local church but find it a real struggle to do so. It is vital that we listen to what the leavers say about their reasons for leaving, and that we take seriously our responsibilities towards them<sup>4</sup>. Of course, there will be those who leave because they have lost their faith or have made lifestyle choices that are incompatible with Christian discipleship, and for whom we

should continue to be concerned. But the more fundamental (and so more pressing) issue concerns the way we respond to those increasing numbers of committed Christians who have come to view the church as yet another drain on their resources, rather than a community that is dynamic and energizing<sup>5</sup>.

SO: How do we respond to those who still love Jesus but have come to see the church as (at best) irrelevant and unhelpful? How do we help them on their spiritual journey?

### **The unreached**

Alongside this, we have to recognise that large segments of the UK population remain untouched by the gospel and continue to see the church as belonging to an alien way of life. There are also a growing number of young adults who have probably grown up with little Christian teaching and see no relevance for the church and formal religion within the context of a fairly hedonistic sub-culture. Apart from anything else, Sunday is likely to be spent sleeping off the effects of Saturday night's clubbing!

SO: How do we reach out to our culture? How can we demonstrate effectively that the gospel is the key to making sense of the world and ourselves within it?

Of course, these questions are not new, but they do need to be asked anew, and especially at such a time as this.

I am convinced that we need to keep doing what we are doing, and do it even better - there is an important role for the Church (perhaps especially for a growing older generation) as a source of stability and permanence in the midst of what can seem chaotic change, and in what is very much a youth-focused culture. The Church is also intended to be "a credible sign,

instrument and foretaste of God's reign over all nations and all things"<sup>6</sup>, which means (among other things) generating an awareness of transcendence. The Church should be different from other human institutions and organisations because it points to the God who is ultimately not like us. Furthermore, the church has a prophetic role, which will often mean critiquing the culture, subjecting new developments to Biblical scrutiny. But we also need to think along radically different lines about the nature of the church and the various ways of authentically expressing its essence.

Having sketched in the background, and outlined the challenge, it is time to consider our response. In doing so, we need to address some theological issues before considering a few of their practical implications.

### **Theological issues**

*Firstly*, there seems to be an urgent need to grasp hold of the Biblical concept of God as Creator and the world as his creation (rather than simply "our environment").

This means, first and foremost, a greater awareness of the glory and holiness of "the high and lofty One ... [who lives] in a high and holy place" (Is 57:15). To speak of God as creator (and ourselves, therefore, as creatures) is to declare that He is not like us, and to open ourselves to mystery, uncertainty, unpredictability. It is to acknowledge that worship is His right and our duty<sup>7</sup>.

However, a proper understanding of God as creator must also recognize that He is the one who gives and sustains life, the one who fills everything in every way. Not only does creation bear the hallmarks of the creator, it is also infused with his life and energy.

**Secondly**, I would suggest that we need to re-think our understanding of the church. The Baptist emphasis on the local congregation has contributed much to the life of the church as a whole, and in many ways, is a model of church which is well-placed to meet the needs and aspirations of our culture. However, we also need to stretch our thinking in both directions.

We need to think **bigger**, in terms of the universal church. As Baptists, we have tended to pay lip-service to this conviction, while continuing to believe that the local church is what really counts. And yet the fundamental truth about the church is that it consists of "all the saints" (Eph 3:18; cf 4:4-6), the whole vast rainbow people of God, scattered throughout time and space, and yet united by a common faith in Christ. This is what the church is.

But we also need to think **smaller**. We look to Jesus' words in Matt 18:20 as the foundation for our life together in the local congregation (and rightly so, in my view); yet we still don't really believe 2 or 3 is quite enough (unless it's the church prayer meeting and hardly anyone has turned up!). I believe that we need to take these words far more seriously as a basic definition of the gathered church, not just in terms of numbers, but also in stripping away the "churchy" elements which we somehow feel must be in place for it to be church. This basic definition allows for a dynamic view of church, so that any gathering in the name of Jesus may be seen as an expression of church (without necessarily being regarded also as a church). This is where the church is found, wherever people meet in the name of Jesus (whether or not they do so regularly, or within institutional structures).

None of this negates the value of institutional church life and denominational structures, of traditional

patterns of church, meeting at fixed times and in clearly-identified church buildings; but it does allow us to think of church in a variety of different forms: workplace church, niche congregations, cells etc. The emphasis can shift away from the resourcing of the local congregation to "the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry" (Eph 4:12) in every area of their lives. We might be less concerned about the static markers of congregational life (such as numbers attending on any given Sunday). This kind of fluidity and flexibility seems crucial to meeting the challenge of our ever-changing context.

**Thirdly**, in considering the mission of the church, we need to recognize that salvation is God's work and not ours; so the primary question is not "what should we be doing?", but rather "what is God's purpose for the creation?". Ultimately, this is the restoration and healing of the whole of creation, the bringing together of everything into its proper place, under the Lordship of Christ<sup>9</sup>. Personal salvation is therefore an aspect of that overarching purpose.

These seem to me to be key theological issues, about which much more could be said, and which have implications in these areas:

### **Spirituality**

This is an over-used word, which often means little more than "a vague feeling that I can't quite explain"! However, I use it here to describe how as creatures we relate to our creator, and in a Christian context, it must include some understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit.

A bigger concept of God means a broader view of **worship**, taking us beyond the gathering of God's people together on a Sunday to a recognition that the whole

of life can (and should) be offered up in worship, and enabling us to develop forms of corporate worship that are creative, and engaging of all that makes us human. We will feel free to redeem every aspect of culture and thereby find ways of connecting with many of the people within and outside of the church who currently feel alienated. In particular, we will seek to use forms which facilitate a sense of awe and mystery. Buildings (and their décor!) have an important role to play here<sup>9</sup>.

A proper understanding of God as creator will also help us to discover him beyond the confines of that which we normally consider religious. We're familiar, of course, with the idea of finding God in and through the natural world, although I suspect that the extent to which this is experienced by people varies with differences in temperament and personality<sup>10</sup>. But an authentic creation theology would seem to take us further than this, right into the diversity of human culture. It seems both logical and appropriate to think of human culture in the same way that we think of individual human beings: deeply flawed, yet still made in the image of God.

Christian experience is therefore as much about discerning the presence of God in every area of life as it is concerned with meeting him in more obviously "spiritual" experiences of prayer and worship - it's about seeing the image of God in culture as well as in people. We will begin to see evidence of his handiwork in unexpected areas, beyond the Christian sub-culture, in the arts and in popular culture<sup>11</sup>. We will also learn how to discern spirituality in the unchurched. This is expressed in the more obvious, New Age ways, but there is a more latent spirituality which could easily be missed. It seems to me that most unchurched people are further away from church but closer to

God than many of us might think.

We need to embrace the concept of the *spiritual journey*, characterized by growth and change. Alan Jamieson suggests that evangelical-charismatic churches tend to be good at helping people to become Christians but are less well-equipped to enable them to grow<sup>12</sup>. Perhaps the more "institutional" a congregation is, so the more static, fixed at a particular point on the journey, rather like a motorway service station. As people move on in their journey, they face a choice between sticking it out where they are or moving on to somewhere new. Theoretically, the latter is a viable option, given the great diversity in expressions of church. But in practice it's not so easy. This is partly because we tend to view people leaving a church as a wholly negative thing; but more importantly, too many people just don't make it to another church, for a variety of reasons.

It seems to me that one of the key tasks that we face is to fashion church communities that can embrace people at various stages of their journey. This will mean creating an atmosphere in which questioning and doubt are acceptable, even encouraged, so that people feel able to be honest about their struggles. There is an important role for church leaders in modelling this to their congregations. It is also important to create fora for people to share with others who are at the same stage. Many such groups are springing up, consisting largely of those who have already left churches, and therefore functioning completely independently. But it seems far more preferable for such groups to be functioning around the fringes of a church, maintaining contact and drawing support, but without being tightly-controlled. A minimalist view of church enables us to think in such terms.

## Discipleship

There is a very real danger that, in seeking to address the diverse needs and aspirations of 21<sup>st</sup> century people, we succumb to the spirit of the age and simply offer a kind of spiritual consumerism, where people shop around for what they want, in the expectation that all their needs and wants will be met and that life will become increasingly comfortable. The kind of spirituality which fits comfortably is also likely to be very narrow and superficial – one of the great benefits (at least potentially) of a typical local congregation is the diversity of people which it embraces. There is an almost unparalleled opportunity for an individual to be enriched through relationships with people unlike themselves in almost every sense<sup>13</sup>.

So how do we walk this tightrope? The key to this is once again in acknowledging God as creator and Jesus as Lord. This takes us away from focusing on my needs, in favour of seeking how I can best be faithful to God. In terms of worship, where the danger of consumerism is perhaps greatest, we need to recover an emphasis on sacrifice as the basis of our worship. Our whole lives are seen as an offering to God, a costly sacrifice (see Rom 12:1; 2 Sam 24:24; Heb 13:15-16). And if people truly are meeting “in the name of Jesus”, this will mean gathering with a desire to submit to his will. A greater awareness of what God has done for us and who we are in Jesus will help to break the hold of individualistic consumerism.

## Mission

Jurgen Moltmann has a helpful way of expressing the dynamics of mission:

*There are two movements in the life of Christianity: its gathering in the congregation and its mission or sending by way of its vocations in society. Gathering and sending are related to*

*one another like breathing in and breathing out.*<sup>14</sup>

In order to reflect on this, we might consider the well-known words of Jesus in Matt 5:13-16, where he challenges Israel to take up again their vocation in the world, to bear witness to the one true God. The metaphor of light, and especially that of the city on a hill can be taken to refer to our *corporate witness*, as we gather together; and the salt, which is made effective by being scattered (whether as a flavouring or fertilizer), speaks of our *individual ministry*, in our homes and neighbourhoods, schools and workplaces. In recent years, there has been an important emphasis on the latter, which had tended to be neglected in favour of the former. Simon Jones argues persuasively that the primary purpose of the gathered church is the equipping of the saints for their ministry in the world<sup>15</sup>.

However, a slight variation on this is to think of these metaphors in terms of *visibility*. It seems clear to me that there remains a very important role for the church as a visible presence within a community. Many congregations have excellent facilities which could (and should) be used more extensively, in providing resources for the community. This kind of ministry requires a great deal of resourcing, in terms of buildings, personnel and finance, which will probably mean taking the risk of entering into partnerships with local authorities and other secular bodies. It will also require much more of a “parish mentality” than the traditional Baptist model. This is the church as a city on a hill, a light on a stand, a visible presence at the heart of a community.

The metaphor of salt, however, suggests hiddenness (as do many of Jesus’ other metaphors) – it is a picture of the church doing its work in hidden and unobtrusive



ways. For various reasons (including lack of decent premises), some congregations will remain largely unnoticed, relying much more on existing networks and personal relationships than on a high profile as a community organization. The key thing for such congregations is that they don't pour all their energies into doing the same kind of things that the more visible churches are doing. In the same way, work-based ecumenical congregations or community prayer cells have an important role within the body of Christ (and would seem to offer a more viable future for ecumenism).

Lesslie Newbiggin taught us to see ourselves as living in a missionary context – we need to engage in cross-cultural mission, not just across ethnic barriers, but also into the many sub-cultures we encounter, thinking in terms of establishing indigenous churches rather than importing a (probably white, middle-class, forty-something) model from outside<sup>16</sup>.

It is clear that the church in the West faces enormous challenges in maintaining its life and in presenting a credible witness

to the world, and we do ourselves no favours by refusing to face reality. It may well be that congregational life (as we have known it) will continue to diminish and decline. However, the present context also offers unprecedented opportunities for communicating the gospel and for filling the vacuum at the heart of our culture. Baptist churches are well-placed, both in their traditional forms, and in allowing for more flexible structures. A key question for any congregation will be: what kind of community is God calling us to be, on the basis of our context and our resources?

Ultimately, though, the kingdom, the power and the glory belong to God who is at work in the world, bringing all things together under Christ. Christ will build his church, and the gospel continues to be the power of God for salvation to all who believe. These convictions are the basis for a hopeful future. **bmj**

I would be happy to receive any comments on this paper – e-mail me at [rob@rtrickey.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:rob@rtrickey.freeserve.co.uk)

- <sup>1</sup> See "The future just happened" by Michael Lewis (Coronet : 2001) for a fascinating account of some of these developments.
- <sup>2</sup> See further "Changing world, changing church" by Michael Moynagh (Monarch : 2001) and "Get a grip on the future without losing your hold on the past" by Gerard Kelly (Monarch : 1999).
- <sup>3</sup> Peter Brierley has suggested that the fastest-growing religious group in the UK consists of Christians who no longer attend church.
- <sup>4</sup> See Matt 18:12-14, which is not about reaching the lost but retrieving the wanderers.
- <sup>5</sup> See "A churchless faith" by Alan Jamieson (SPCK : 2002).
- <sup>6</sup> Lesslie Newbiggin's telling phrase, from "The Open Secret", p169 (SPCK : 1978).
- <sup>7</sup> See the penetrating critique by David Wells in "God in the wasteland", p114 (IVP : 1994).
- <sup>8</sup> See Eph 1:9-10.
- <sup>9</sup> Simon Jenkins (a self-described "non-believer") speaks of the way in which a church building "lifts my spirit and aids my meditation ... I am often asked, did nothing rub off from all these visits? Did you feel no breath of sanctity, no shiver of holiness? I cannot deny it. I did sense the specialness of these places" (in *The Times*, 19 Oct 2002).
- <sup>10</sup> See also Philip Yancey's comments in "Finding God in Unexpected Places", pp 27-31 (Hodder & Stoughton : 2002).
- <sup>11</sup> See for example the novels of Douglas Coupland or the film "American Beauty".
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, pp120-124.
- <sup>13</sup> See "Struggling to belong" by Simon Jones, pp86-105 (IVP : 1998).
- <sup>14</sup> In "Spirit of life", p234 (SCM : 1992).
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, pp31-45.
- <sup>16</sup> This is a core value for Urban Expression, doing creative and demanding work in inner-city, "de-churched" London.

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## ARE YOU PREPARED FOR AN EMERGENCY?

We regularly hear in the news of accidents and catastrophes and our thoughts immediately turn to the help which will be needed. Sadly in many of these little prior thought will have been given on how to cope with such an emergency situation with the result that the impact is much greater than it might have been.

Two recent and quite different incidents occurred in churches which we insure which have prompted me to ask myself whether other churches have given any thought to emergencies which might arise within their own activities.

The first incident occurred during a Sunday Service when an elderly lady had a "bit of a turn" – and she collapsed in her pew. The Service was stopped – fortunately one of the church members was a doctor (with a mobile phone) and she was taken care of.

The second incident related to water damage to a church. Our surveyor was visiting a church one Monday morning and found it like an ants' nest which had been kicked over - people rushing around and achieving very little. Their newly installed water heater in a just refurbished kitchenette had burst the mains inlet water pipe on the Sunday night (poor soldering by the plumber) and water had flowed unchecked for 14 hours resulting in serious damage throughout the building.

Fortunately our surveyor was able to arrange for a Loss Adjuster to attend within two hours - with one quick phone call to our claims department. The Church did not even think of insurers at that time - and really did not know where to turn to for help.

It does not take much imagination to relate these to other types of incidents which could occur within a church environment where people and property are not watched over 24 hours of the day 7 days a week. Could your church have coped if you were faced with events similar to these?

Although emergencies cannot be eliminated, a relatively simple Emergency Action Plan in place will enable key persons to respond quickly bringing with it a degree of efficiency which could in some cases, save lives. The plan should include things to do in case of emergency and identify those areas which are likely to have the most impact on your church both by way of its members and property.

I would encourage you to consider such a Plan of Action on how your church would tackle emergency situations arising within your church. In addition to guidance this should provide a list names and telephone numbers of who to contact apart from the obvious emergency services i.e. Doctor, Plumber, Electrician, Builder, Heating Engineer and of course your Insurer.

It should also provide the Locations in your buildings of where the Electricity, Gas and Water supplies can be turned off.

This list should then be prominently displayed in those areas where it can be read and absorbed at leisure or when an emergency arises.

Do remember by definition Emergencies occur without warning. Don't wait to find out - how unprepared you are. Please think about it NOW.

Yours Sincerely

Alf Green ACII

ASSISTANT GENERAL MANAGER

# 'Because I am not a hand...'

**Catriona Gorton, final-year ministerial student at Northern Baptist College, reflects on Single People and the Church**

There is a delightful sense of the ridiculous in Paul's comparison of the body of Christ to the human body in 1 Corinthians 12. Can such a statement of the obvious fail to illustrate the absurdity of church as a place where some feel unwelcome or undervalued? The sad fact is that churches are full of people who feel inadequate because of what they are not – whether that be race, gender, age, education, wealth or marital status.

Endeavouring to write a short article on single people and the church is a risky undertaking. Risky, because some readers will immediately turn to the next page either assuming that it is irrelevant to them or that it is the ravings of some irate woman with a chip on her shoulder. It is risky, too because I can only write from my own perspective: my experience of being single in the church and the findings of my research; these may differ from that of others. Finally, it is risky because single people are only one of many minority groups in the church- why should we be heard and not others?

It is to Paul's image that I return to justify myself! The human body is actually composed of numerous, specialised, minority parts – two feet, hands, ears or eyes; even the more numerous ribs, vertebrae and digits actually constitute only a small part of the whole. Yet, Paul observes, if one part suffers, the whole suffers. So it is with the church: the experience of one minority group inevitably affects the health and wellbeing of the whole. The experience of single people is no less – and no more – important than that of any other group. It is, therefore as a part of the whole that 'is not a hand' that I dare to speak for the minority of which I am a part.

Single people's experience of church is an area in which there has been comparatively little research. In this article

I endeavour to share the findings of a small research project carried out as part of my undergraduate studies.

Right at the start, it is important to state what I mean by 'single' in this context. My research included any who chose to name themselves as such – the contributors included men and women of all ages. Whilst around 40% had never been married, the remainder included widowed, divorced and separated. In a few cases contributors lived with dependents or friends but the vast majority lived alone. On average, in the churches surveyed around 30% of the regular attenders were single by this definition (range 21% - 63%). The key findings from this primary research are identified towards the end of the article.

## Literature

There is extensive Christian literature in the area of singleness, most focuses on relationships, ethics or health and life-style issues. In the secular field, there is a similar spread of material on relationships, health and life-style issues. Most fiction presents a broadly negative view of singleness, though a few exceptions were discovered.

In this section, I have endeavoured to identify what I believe to be the most significant publications for Baptist ministers, either because they attempt some serious theology or because they provide useful insights to singleness.

## Baptist Union Publications

*Belonging: A Resource for the Christian Family* (1994, out of print) notes that the church is 'in danger of marginalizing this growing section of society' and a chapter in *Making Moral Choices* focuses on singleness in the context of human sexuality. The material is an honest attempt to face the issues of singleness but falls into the trap of limiting it largely to sexual ethics.

## Grove Booklets

*A Place in the Family: the Single Person in the Local Church* (Gillett et al, second edition 1987) and *Singled Out or One on the Body* (Deshpande, 2001) are part of the pastoral series and consider important questions about care of single people. The sad fact is that despite being published almost two decades apart they need to cover so much similar ground.

## Specific Books

Choosing specific books is difficult, since my own views inevitably colour the selection. What follows is only a very small selection from the hundred or so books and articles I read during my research.

*One of Us – Single People as Part of the Church* (Chilcraft, Word, 1993) presents the results of an extensive survey undertaken by the Evangelical Alliance. Although published a decade ago, the findings remain valid. It includes detailed recommendations for churches.

*The Single Issue* (Hsu, IVP, 1997) reviews the history of the church's attitude to singleness and endeavours to develop a theology of singleness. Its main fault is the assumption that by age 35 all single people simply vanish – we don't!

*Single Women, Challenge to the Church* (Aune, Paternoster, 2002) was reviewed in the Baptist Times soon after publication.

This work in my view, covers similar ground to my own research but was limited to women, most of whom were aged under 30.

## Fiction

The vast majority of fiction presents single people in a very negative light. However, the following merit consideration:

Anita Brookner's novels *Hotel du Lac* (Penguin, 1993) and *Bay of Angels* (Viking, 2001) both explore issues of older single people, including death of a parent and the realisation that marriage may not be the route to fulfilment.

The (in)famous *Bridget Jones' Diary* (Fielding, Picador, 1996) both entertains and infuriates (after all she gets her man in the end!) whilst showing some keen insights into the world of the single woman.

Finally, *Letters from a Solo Survivor* (Keay, Hodder and Stoughton, 1987 (believed to be out of print) is entertaining and informative, being written by a Christian woman who had lived the life of which she wrote. Although it reflects a world now changed, the insights are as keen as when I first read them a decade ago.

## **Results of Primary Research**

The number of single people in Britain is growing and now accounts for anything up to half of households. This situation seems to be reflected in the makeup of churches, notwithstanding that in churches there may be less young, never married people and more older, widowed people. Given the significant numbers of lone adults (typically 1 in 3 members in the churches involved in my research) how is the church performing?

My research involved seven churches

(five Baptist, one Anglican and one Methodist) plus a group of 'professional Christians' – ministers, religious sisters, etc. In all 61 individual replies were received. Whilst such a sample size is not statistically significant, it compares favourably with those used in some of the literature reviewed.

In analysing the results, I used a 'traffic light' system to band the 'positive' response rate to questions. This fairly crude approach, allocated the response to one of four bands, 'good', 'fair', 'poor' and 'very poor,' according to the proportion of positive replies received. The bands were defined as follows: -

Good ('green light') - 75% or more of replies were 'positive'

Fair ('amber light') – 50% or more but less than 75% positive replies

Poor ('red light') – 25% or more but less than 50% positive replies

Very poor ('blue') – less than 25% of replies were positive

The findings showed that whilst there is no room for complacency, there are areas where the experience of church is generally good.

#### Green Light

The church is doing well. Single people feel part of and valued by the church, are included in worship, allowed to achieve their potential, develop their gifts and talents and are provided with appropriate pastoral support.

#### Amber Light

The church is doing quite well but could do even better. Special services (Mothers' Day, dedication, weddings, etc.) are not uncomfortable for two-thirds of respondents. Over half of the replies suggested that single people's needs are addressed by services and included in

prayers, that single people are involved in church government and worship leadership and that social activities consider the needs of single people.

#### Red Light

The church performs poorly and should improve. Only one third of replies indicated that people felt the church either affirmed or celebrated their status, that language was sensitive to single people or that the frequency of focus on the nuclear family was appropriate. These areas are of concern. Although explored further in interviews no further insights to these issues emerged and further work would be needed to address them.

#### Blue

The church has very poor performance. The areas identified were preaching, teaching and Biblical perspectives on singleness. Rarely if ever will a person hear a sermon or attend a study on singleness – yet churches assume that their single members know what is expected of them.

#### Views of Church leaders

Overall, the picture emerging from church members was reflected by the views of their leaders. However, the leaders had a more positive view than their members. Particular areas of mismatch related to sensitive language, affirmation of single status and preaching/teaching on singleness, where leaders perceived a 'better' situation than did members.

#### Conclusions from Research

The research undertaken has identified that whilst there is much that is good, there some key areas of concern in single people's experience of church, namely language, service focus, attitude towards singleness and teaching/preaching on and Biblical exploration of the single status. These areas need to be addressed by the churches if they wish! to take seriously their ongoing role in supporting these

members of the body of Christ.

## Theological Reflection

In closing this article, it is important to allow insights from the Bible and Christian Tradition to speak to what has been shared.

The Bible is peppered with stories of single people: widows (e.g. Ruth), single parents (e.g. Hagar), divorcees (e.g. Vashti) and 'never married' (e.g. Jeremiah). Prophet/esses (e.g. Anna) and prostitutes (e.g. Rahab), young (e.g. Miriam) and old (e.g. Naomi), happy endings (widows whose sons were raised) and tragedies (Paul's death in prison), they reflect the diverse experience of single people in churches today.

Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11 speak of the church as a place where status – race, gender and class – disappears. Within the church, members are interdependent: Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 use the image of the human body to express this. The body is composed of diverse parts of equal worth, each being important for it to function. Taken together, these passages affirm the single person within the 'body of Christ' that is the church. Made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) they are of equal worth to those who are married. 1 Corinthians 12:26 states that if one part of the body suffers, it all suffers. If single people suffer, e.g. through careless use of language or lack of teaching, so do the married people in the church – the whole suffers.

Christian history shows that attitudes towards singleness (in all forms) have changed over time, swinging from one extreme to the other. Never is there a balanced view with marriage and celibacy

as complementary alternatives, each with scriptural warrant (e.g. Genesis 2:24 and 1 Corinthians 7). The Bible shows that God has called into service single and married people, suggesting that, whilst circumstances may make one or other more appropriate, neither is superior.

The gospels show among Jesus' followers people who were married (e.g. Peter) and those who most probably weren't (e.g. Mary, Martha and Lazarus). Whilst taking a stern line on divorce and sexual ethics (e.g. Matthew 5:27-32), Jesus' attitude to family life appears ambivalent (c.f. Matthew 13:46-50 and John 19:26-27). Nowhere does he compare the merits of marriage and celibacy; what he does do is to advocate love for God, for neighbour and, implicitly, for oneself (e.g. Luke 10:26-28). Single people must love and value themselves in order to be able to love their non-single 'brothers and sisters' (and vice versa). For this to happen, the church needs to become aware of, and respond to, issues explored in this project.

The ecumenical movement often speaks of 'unity in diversity' to describe the situation where denominations acknowledge both what they share and how they differ in a spirit of love and respect. This expression seems a fitting aim for the church in its constituents of single and married people. We must listen to, and learn from, each other, respecting the insights each brings, in order to create a church where all are valued as of equal worth.

Because I am not a hand... is precisely why I am important to the church, whoever I am. **bmj**

# When I was a child

**Simon Shutt, Children's Ministry Co-ordinator for the Faith Awareness in Children Trust, writes of his concern to see the faith that is already present in children acknowledged, accepted and valued as they are helped to move on in their journey of faith.**

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. I Cor.13:11.

Paul refers to the idea of a child developing into an adult. The purpose of him mentioning children and adults is merely to assist his teaching to the Corinthians. He doesn't want to consider child development theories! However, he notes that as children develop they leave behind what belongs to their childhood and move into a new stage of development, adulthood. He expresses the obvious fact that things move on and there is more to come and that as we progress so we need to leave behind that which belongs to an earlier stage. In essence it would be inappropriate for an adult to behave in a child like way, but for this argument to be true the converse has to be acknowledged. It would be inappropriate for a child to behave in an adult way.

The work of FACT (Faith Awareness in Children Trust) was established seven years ago to enable children to respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ with an expression of faith that is appropriate to their age and development. This small charity based in the north west corner of Surrey has sought to allow children opportunities to talk and think like children. This is mainly achieved through work with primary schools, churches and parenting support sessions.

FACT's work with churches, schools and the community recognises that we fish in the same presupposition pool as Paul, accepting that we are made to grow and develop from one stage to another. This

is acutely seen in very young children. They grow physically, linguistically and socially at a pace. Their mental and educational abilities increase along with their dexterity and athleticism. Many today also develop large bank balances - thanks to grandparents and the like! - but each stage of development is complete in itself.

## **Children are not simply adults in the making**

When a baby first rolls over or crawls, there is delight from watching parents at the progress and achievement. There is no scolding of the child that they can't walk or disappointment that they can 'only' roll or crawl. Acceptance and joy beam from the faces of mums or dads who acknowledge and value the stage of development the child has reached. They respond to that child, not with letters of congratulation or texts on their mobiles, but by gentle words and touches. Their response is appropriate to the stage of development. The baby is complete at its point of development, but everyone accepts that there is further development to come while not denying the validity of the position held.

This idea of progress is also seen in the realm of faith development. There has been much work carried out in this area by the likes of James Fowler, John Westerhoff III, Thomas Groome and many others. Their models of faith development are continually being revisited and revised, but the principle of movement from one

stage of faith to another while accepting the completeness and validity of any given stage remains a constant.

If churches are to take this principle seriously they need to radically rethink their evangelistic strategies in relation to children, young people and adults. They will need to rethink what they do in their Sunday schools and mid week clubs. They will need to question the content and style of worship with their congregations.

Many churches would claim to have successful children's work, pointing to the numbers of children attending, but would also admit to struggling youth work with young people seemingly evaporating in to thin air or voting with their feet. Is this just 'Where they are at' or should we as churches re-examine how we are nurturing faith at each stage? Are we assisting the development of faith at each stage or hindering it? Do our children experience faith or are they simply educated about it? If we will not acknowledge children's faith at its given stage of development for all that it is we run the risk of stunting and marring these young lives and their future relationship with God.

Part of my work in recent years has afforded me the opportunity to visit churches to carry out audits on what is being done, why and how. Sadly, I have witnessed a lot of children's work carried out in churches that works out of the principle of containment. Children are taught about God so that at a later date they might 'come to faith'. This idea of 'sowing seeds that will later mature' is very prevalent amongst evangelical churches of all denominational flavours. This is an approach that denies the reality of faith at this stage, a faith that is complete at this particular point of the journey but still has further to travel. Who amongst us would be arrogant enough to suggest that we have

'arrived'? It is worth noting that many adults in our churches are still operating out of a child like faith and so we may need to consider the best way of helping them on in what John Bunyan would have recognised as their pilgrimage.

### **The reality of childrens' faith**

So what should we be doing to nurture faith in our children? I believe it is vital that we first acknowledge children's faith as being real. Children mimic adults, but we should not dismiss these as empty acts, on the contrary they are unspoken compliments showing the child's desire to be like Mum, Dad, or the pastor and are genuine attempts to engage with people and God. How many of us have been guilty of using children in our Sunday services as visual aids to demonstrate a point to the adult congregation? Our intentions have been to include them in the service, but as we do this we inadvertently make them second class citizens. Would we be so quick to use adults in the same way to demonstrate a point to children? Perhaps we have called the children to the front to sing the first verse of 'Away in a Manger' in a carol service, to which the response of the rest of the congregation has been to coo and enjoy the entertainment, rather than recognise the worship of God being offered. I would be the first to admit that children's worship can be entertaining but it should never be entertainment. If extemporaneous prayer occurs in our services are children allowed to participate or is this domain of the adults? If they do take part are their simple prayers considered to be 'real' or are they just copying what they see being modelled?

Those of us in positions of leadership need to lead by example while educating others to approach children in a different way. Once we accept that children's faith is real we need to seek approaches to



nurture it in appropriate age-related ways. Children have an ability to turn their attention on and off very quickly while adults have a tendency to take a time to 'warm up', but once 'up to temperature' they can maintain that level for some while. Consider the way your Sunday service is constructed. Is it designed for short sharp bursts allowing opportunities for people to engage and disengage as and when they are able or is it designed to build to crescendo, probably at the preaching of the Word? Remember, a good number of adults operate at a child like level of faith. How many times, following an all age service / family service have people reported to you that, 'I got a lot out of the children's talk' or some such comment? These talks are often adult orientated but with very simple language and use visual aids as a prompt. We can easily fall into the trap of associating this simple language with being child friendly. This is not always the case. It is possible to design our acts of worship to allow for both needs in our congregation and as we acknowledge that children operate in this way so we can be more accommodating of the little shuffles and movements that occur. We must stop looking for adult responses from children. We must start to look and acknowledge the very real response of children to God.

### **'All-Age' is not an easy 'catch-all'**

In the last 50 years or so the church in this country, regardless of denomination, has sought to engage with the culture around it. The growth of 'Family Services' which later metamorphosed into 'All Age Worship', have largely failed to match the title they were given as the practice didn't

match the stated policy. The concept stated by many was that these services were designed to be child friendly, but all too often they were updated models of previous services that tolerated children while seeking to engage the adults. These services have often been seen as opportunities to reach out into the community or to the fringe element of our churches. Sadly the billing of 'All Age' has been a mask as the thrust is still at adults while using children as a means to get at them.

Children appear to be happy with their lot but once they reach an age where they can exercise their independent desires, they vote with their feet. As churches, we then invest copious amounts of resources into the youth work trying to recover them while if we had taken more notice of their young faith earlier then the subsequent stages of faith would be less rocky.

Children tend to be very active physically. Do our services allow for that? If they do, do they seek to contain these mobile worshippers or do they seek to engage them?

I recognise that I have posed more questions than I have answered in this brief article, but the challenge of children in our churches is before us each week. Are you taking it seriously? Think as an adult in a child-like way to allow children the opportunity to grow and develop. **bmj**

For more information on the work of FACT e-mail [office@fact2000.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:office@fact2000.fsnet.co.uk) or contact them via their website <http://www.fact2000.fsnet.co.uk>

# Prompted by Prague

**Peter Eastwood, Brixington Community Church, Exmouth, experiences a brief period of study leave at the International Baptist Theological Seminary, Prague**

In thirty-four years of ministry my first week's study leave was partly spent at IBTS. It was a valuable time of inspiration, challenge and fellowship. I have since wondered why I waited so long to use this privileged time set aside for Baptist ministers.

The arranged lectures and seminars covering Old Testament narrative, which highlighted the descriptive passages and separate texts, were looked at in a new light to me, focussing on the Divine inspiration rather than the contrary theories that were put forward by 19<sup>th</sup> century theologians, current in my early days of training. This emphasis on the Old Testament whet my theological appetite to read more of what Biblical scholars have to say today.

The seminar on Eco-theological considerations was also informative and a new addition to theological curricula. For me the information was not new, as I have for a long time taken an active part in promoting the importance of "green issues", as a Christian minister. The good things about this subject being part of the training programme of a Baptist College was that it attempted to show the relationship between the natural world and the spiritual world.

We enjoyed a seminar and also a separate debate on the subject of Missiology. The lecture for me was a breath of fresh air and I felt envious of the students at IBTS, as this was never a priority in my original college training. Although we only covered one small section of this course, it outlined that God is a "God of Mission". He sent His Son, His Son sent disciples, the disciples sent others etc.

The debate was very interesting. The

lecturer advocated that all the subjects which students cover on their course should be directed to Mission. This was a very challenging concept and one which I found myself largely agreeing to.

There was a session on the philosophy of post modernism. It gave us a very clear insight and understanding of the subject. The lecturer challenged us to take seriously the trends in thinking and attitudes in present day society. The church cannot ignore these if it seriously intends to communicate its message and contemporary relevance.

Finally, we enjoyed an introduction to Baptist Ecclesiology. For the historians among us this was a delight. This was no simple reflection on past events and important characters of the past. We were reminded that there were many lessons to be learned from the lives and situations of our forebears in the Faith. It was also interesting to reflect on procedures and beliefs in the Anabaptist tradition that are being rediscovered in Baptist Faith and Practice today - not always being promoted by those who are engaged in research in Church history but being re-birthed in church situations by the Holy Spirit, sometimes without congregations realising Anabaptist Christians had been prompted in the same way in past generations.

There was plenty of time for reflection, fellowship with colleagues and the rest of the student body where an exchange of

views could be shared. The lecturers were readily available at coffee times and extremely helpful and tolerant! The library was excellent and offered all of us either a time to do some new reading or some sermon craft. The total Prague experience is something I would very much commend to other ministers' groups. And being with

people you knew made the experience richer than any individual time of study I have previously had. I express appreciation to all at IBTS, BUGB Mission department, my church and members of the Exeter and District Minister's Fellowship who provided a very valuable and enjoyable study period. **bmj**

## BOOK REVIEWERS

In order to maintain the variety of material reflected in the Book Review pages of the Journal, John Houseago would like to extend the list of people willing to act as reviewers, drawing from as wide as possible a range of situations. He would be pleased to receive names of those who are willing to act as reviewers.

All that is required is an interest in the subject matter (we are not looking for 'experts'!), an ability to draw out significant themes and points which may be helpful to others and the courage to bring recommendation or caution with respect to each book.

Your reward – the book itself!

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# Book Reviews

Edited by John Houseago

*Choice, Desire and the Will of God – What more do you want?*, **David Runcorn**, SPCK, 0-281-05315-4, 2003, £8.99, 119pp + notes.

There are some books the reading of which is a delight, because there is the sense that here is somebody putting into words what one has struggled with, but not managed to articulate. This, for me, is one of these books. There was little sense of discovering something new in the classic intellectual sense – but a deep sense of recognition, of grasping something I had struggled articulate – and believe – of seeing more clearly something I had only caught bare glimpses of before.

In this book, Runcorn is looking at issues of free will, choice and what God wants. But this is no intellectual treatise. It is the record of a struggle to understand and live with integrity, and it is an invitation to join the writer on the journey. More than that, it is an invitation and an encouragement to believe that God is bigger than my idea has so far allowed, and therefore my life can be bigger too – and my prayer can expand beyond recognition.

This is a very personal book. It is written out of Runcorn's own struggles of faith, and it speaks to the reader's struggles, and most particularly, what does it mean to be both human and Christian? He starts from the assumption that choice is an important part of being human, and that choice and desire are closely linked. Bearing in mind that Christians have often regarded desire as something dangerous, Runcorn asks the question about what it would mean if desire was one of the ways we could grow closer to God – and follows the discussion

through from there.

If I have one criticism of the book, it is that I would have liked more – I would love to see the discussion taken on further, especially in the area of physical desire; not simply sexual, but sensual in its widest sense. But one of the marks of a good book is that it leaves the reader to write the next chapter. I will be going back to this book often – both for my own growth, and as a pastoral tool.

**Ruth Gouldbourne, Tutor  
Bristol Baptist College**

*God in All Things* by **Gerard Hughes** (Hodder and Stoughton 2003) ISBN 0-340-86135-5 (pp244 + xii) £10.99

Nearly twenty years on, this book is presented as the sequel to 'God of Surprises', though people who have benefited from Hughes' work will know that his pen has not been idle in the intervening years. In the genre of spiritual direction, 'God in all Things' contains a series of reflections on the journey within the God "in whom we live, move and have our being". From a variety of perspectives, Hughes identifies a "split spirituality" wherein God and the things of God are divided off from everyday life. This split means that the "everyday" face of God is obscured by everything from politics to religion; it is towards the healing of the split, and so towards the liberating realisation that God is in all things, that Hughes directs us.

Hughes' writing is accessible and uncomplicated. He fuses together the wisdom of the past (Augustine and the Spiritual Exercises of Inigo of Loyola have a seminal influence) with insights from

contemporary theologians like Walter Wink. He constantly strives for spirituality with integrity, and therefore has some strong, and sometimes provocative, words to say about such things as the bombing of Afghanistan, global terrorism, world trade, ecumenism and paedophilia. His spiritual vision is truly earthed in this world!

This is a book that should be read slowly, tacitly accepting the invitation into a deeper understanding of Christian faith. The manner in which the material is presented facilitates this, with frequent summaries, and with exercises both within and at the end of each chapter to engage and encourage the reader on the inner journey. This makes it a useful resource, not only for individual study, but also for use within a group. It is a worthy sequel to 'God of Surprises', and I strongly commend it.

**J P Elliston, Darlington**

*Seasonal Worship from the Countryside* by **The Staffordshire Seven** (SPCK 2003) ISBN 0-281-05446-0 (pp239 + xv) £16.99

The rural calendar - winter, spring, summer and autumn - provides a framework for a collection of services, prayers and hymns born out of rural life. Content relating to the major festivals of the Christian year stands alongside material that relates more specifically to the interests and traditions of rural communities. The collection therefore includes services for such things as Plough Sunday, Lambing, and the Blessing of the Soil. There are also sections at the end of the book devoted to 'Community Occasions' and 'Times of Tragedy and Loss'.

All collectors of material face the problem of how much to limit the contents of a publication for the sake of its structural integrity. The collaborators in this work were clearly more concerned with

including material than staying within the confines of their declared purpose, viz. to respond to the absence of seasonal and other special services for rural situations. As a result, a large amount of material is presented, of varying quality, some of which would have been better left out altogether. The lack of discipline in the selection process produces some bizarre and sometimes insensitive juxtapositions of material; for example, material commemorating the death of an animal is placed directly before a section relating to stillbirth and infant death!

This collection is truly eclectic, and at times chaotic. In my view, much of it belongs to an idealised and 'Marplesque' view of rural life that bears scant relation to contemporary country life, but to those who are prepared to sift the gold from the dross, it may have its uses. On the whole, however, the title promises more than it delivers.

**J P Elliston, Darlington.**

*Stubborn Theological Questions.* **John Macquarrie.** SCM Press. 2003. xi + 237pp. (£12.99) ISBN 0-334-02907-4.

Having accumulated over the years a large number of essays and lectures written and delivered for a variety of occasions, the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity Emeritus at Oxford has brought eighteen of them together in a surprisingly readable collection. In making his selection, John Macquarrie was struck how certain issues have kept cropping up, refusing to succumb to easy resolution, these being the "stubborn questions" of the title and which provide the book's three sub-sections.

The first six chapters deal with how we think and speak about God in an increasingly secularised world, followed by another six on the incarnation and the person of Jesus Christ; the final section

deals with the problem of religious knowledge in times when some believe only the empirical sciences provide "real" knowledge. Most chapters give a critique of aspects of the thinking of some theologian or other and a small degree of overlap therefore results.

The greater part of the material was written in the 1980s and 1990s, with the earliest strand dating from 1966. I was particularly interested in the chapter giving Macquarrie's response to the book, "The Myth of God Incarnate", first published in 1977. Not only was this debate something I lived through myself in the early years of my ministry, but by coincidence I had recently been taught by a majority of the book's contributors, as well as by Macquarrie himself.

This personal link made me realise that I would have found this present book a useful primer in its areas of concern as I approached my finals in Theology. For the most part I found issues being helpfully clarified, though even now I can't say I understand the significance of every point John Macquarrie makes. I suggest you check out the chapter headings for yourself to see if you'd also enjoy it.

**Ken Stewart, Horfield, Bristol**

*Stephen R Holmes 'Tradition and Renewal in Baptist life' - the Whitley Lecture 2003.*

Available from Whitley Publications, c/o Regent's Park College, Pusey Street, Oxford.

This year's Whitley lecture is being delivered by Stephen Holmes, Lecturer in Christian Doctrine at King's College, London. It is well worth hearing and reading, though a little more expenditure on the cover next year would be welcome! I heard it during the May Cardiff BUGB Assembly, my review copy in hand.

Its chief concern is to direct 'our people' into those safe and reliable experiences of God that can be found in the sacraments of baptism and communion. In the process of making this appeal, *for such it is*, Stephen questions some of the places where currently Christians are drilling for spiritual water. Celtic spirituality, the retreat movement, the ecumenical movement and charismatic renewal all ultimately fail to deliver the bona fide article he argues. Each 'will do us much good, but will not guarantee us reliable experiences of God.'

Stephen Holmes doctoral thesis was based around the writings of Jonathan Edwards and the Evangelical Revival. It shows! Much of his subject's strong mistrust of alleged spiritual experiences has clearly rubbed off. Better, Holmes argues, to rediscover the early Baptist invitation 'to link assurances of God's favour with participation in the sacraments.' The loss of the sacramental tradition is, he suggests, 'a real and genuine loss from our Baptist life.' We will find God in the baptistery and at the communion table especially. This case is well made. Stephen is very aware of the limitations of his associated arguments, however, at times - see footnote 90 for example. As one who would want to argue that our genuine experiences of God are far more frequent than Dr Holmes suggests, I did not in the end find this lecture convincing. I enjoyed engaging with it very much, nonetheless.

**Michael I Bochenski, St Albans**