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the baptist ministers' journal

April 2020 volume 346

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**the baptist ministers'**

# journal

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# *From the editor*

## *At this time*

There is only one story on everyone's lips at this time: the impact of Covid 19 on the life of every person on the planet. I do not intend to add here to the many helpful reflections, devotions and suggestions that are so readily available, thanks to social media, but rather to offer my gratitude to Lisa and Alan Kerry for the 'real time' conversation they agreed to develop for us in this issue, which outlines some of the current issues for ministers and doctors. One of my hopes going forward is that *bmj* will continue to provide a snapshot not only of Baptist ministry at any moment in time, but also—through this ministry window—a view of our wider social context, making it an interesting resource for historians in the future.

I would be interested to consider publishing your own stories and reflections on the coronavirus crisis in future issues of *bmj*, so if this time of isolation offers you the chance to pick up the pen, please do so—and I am happy to advise if you would like to discuss an article before starting to write. I would be interested in personal, theological and ministerial observations—or, indeed, writing on other topics.

Hopefully this issue will provide some reading matter during the lockdown. We have an article on divine suffering and pastoral care, which is pertinent; plus pieces on soul-friendship, ecumenism, and retirement—and book reviews and personal news.

Finally, you might be interested in this snippet from *The Fraternal* of April 1920:

*The Editor regrets that he [sic] cannot make of this magazine what he feels it ought to be. It is all a question of circulation...If all the Baptist ministers in the country belonged to our own Union* [now known as the BMF] *it would be possible...to make it a really effective organ for the expression of our common life and need. The present members might help very largely to gain this result by commencing propaganda amongst the brethren who do not at present belong to our Union.*

For this and other interesting flashbacks, do visit *bmj* on Theology on the Web, where our back issues are archived, thanks to the work of Rob Bradshaw (http://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bmj-01.php).

With every blessing this Eastertime: may the risen Christ bring us hope. *SN*

# Covid 19: a clerical-medical discussion

## by Rev Lisa Kerry and Dr Alan Kerry

*Editor's note: this dialogue was prepared in the early stages of the coronavirus restrictions in the UK and by the time of publication things might have changed—for example, Alan's return to the NHS.*

At a time when our news is consumed by one story—the worldwide pandemic of Covid 19—it is difficult to write anything at all 'definitive'. The situation will probably be very different by the time this is read. So, if only for historical interest, we hereby offer our tentative thoughts as a practising Baptist minister (Lisa Kerry, L) and a recently retired NHS GP (Alan Kerry, A).

A We find ourselves in a strange situation: what would you say are the defining characteristics of this situation?

L As a minister I'm reflecting on a week of dealing with my church over the phone and via the internet, and discovering that actually the younger end of the population are more likely to embrace the changes that are being forced upon them, and to understand the significance and the severity of them, whereas the older population tends to have a slight touch of denial…

A 'I've been through the war, me…'

L Yeah, so the difficulty is that while I want to avoid engendering even more fear, I'm trying to convince my older church members that they really shouldn't be going out, that they should accept help and that life can't carry on as normal; and this is actually much more difficult

A Taking meals round to one or two yesterday I thought there was a level of anxiety there, but I think you're right that our older members are doing a good job of keeping a lid on that—but when we watch the news there does seem to be quite a lot of anxiety 'out there': panic buying and so forth. I suppose as a doctor I learned fairly early on in my career that when people are unwell or anxious, they don't always behave well. Illness can bring out both the best and the worst in people.

L No, and I think for our older people in the church, one of the peculiar difficulties for in this situation is that they would have responded in the past by being a 'doing' people, doing things and helping others. Quite a lot of our 'do-ers' and helpers are the very ones who are now stuck with inactivity, which means they can't distract themselves by helping their neighbours, because they need to keep themselves to themselves and receive help. They can't do the displacement activities they perhaps

would have done to balance that fear. And, of course there are also a few people who are ringing us every day as if they are the only people in the world that this is happening to. Fear can reduce some of us to the lowest common denominator

A I clearly recall a patient from way back, who saw me to ask if I could expedite her routine surgery and when I pointed out that there was a waiting list because other people were waiting, her response was 'I don't care about them, I'm worried about me'. I was somewhat taken aback by how starkly she said that but she had a point. I, as her doctor, was HER advocate, and presumably the other patients had GPs of their own who should advocate for them! So sometimes this bad behaviour, it's easy to be hypercritical, but it comes from a place of genuine fear and anxiety.

I also learned, though this took me a little longer as a doctor, that I wasn't going to be able to challenge people's bad behaviour: that went down very badly I found! But do you think the church has a role in encouraging good behaviour?

L I think the conversations I've had with the over 70s, that actually it's not just about keeping them safe—it's about keeping others safe—that has been an easier conversation. People are more willing to accept a restriction of behaviour if they think it keeps other people safe, rather than just themselves. Apart from a very few, I haven't had to speak to anyone about hoarding food and panic buying; I haven't come across any of that behaviour. Within the church, it's not so much 'bad' behaviour it's 'denial' behaviour: why they can't have their groups at the church? I don't think that's the same thing, I think that's a process of coming to terms…

A Yes, and it's happening head-spinningly quickly, we're recording this on Friday and Boris (Johnson) only made his first big announcement about social distancing on Monday. So the situation has changed very rapidly and will have changed again by the time anyone reads this, so it does take time for people to come to terms with changes of this magnitude. Does scripture help us with any of this?

L I was preparing my sermon for Sunday and the passage we had was Matthew 11, where John the Baptist is 'in isolation' in prison and seems to be suffering anxiety as a result. He's gone from being very confident about who Jesus is and welcoming in His Kingdom to sending a rather plaintive message via the disciples, asking 'is this really the Messiah or should we expect someone else?' Jesus responds by asking him to consider the signs of what is going on, and to read those signs; 'the lame are walking, the blind are receiving their sight': all signs for John to read into the situation, not just the here and now, but what has been talked about and planned for generations beforehand. So, I think scripture does have something to speak into even this situation. Jesus was not unfamiliar with bad things happening to many in society: they did not have the freedoms that we have, they were living under occupation, they weren't free to go about their daily business in the way that we've been used to—and I think Jesus' call to look at what is going on

around us is an important one. We need to take note of events and see how that tells us where God's Kingdom is coming. And there are perhaps good and bad signs with the coronavirus situation, it's not all bad, but we need to look for places where God's Kingdom is coming in spite of how we may feel.

A In what ways is it not 'bad'? Are you suggesting that God may be using this for a higher purpose? What do you have in mind there?

L I'm not sure I want to extrapolate quite that far, I think what I want to say is that when these things happen, and they happen to people of faith and no-faith equally, there is something about the Kingdom of God that can still come in while this bad thing is happening and they are the things to look for. So, the fact that this has brought about a renewed valuing of community and society and face-to-face contact is a very good thing. I think it's something we've taken for granted forever, as I said to one person from my church on the phone today 'won't it be lovely when we're all back together and we will really value the fact that we can gather'.

A Yes, we sometimes need to stop, to value what we're missing. As patients recover from illness and recover functionality and become able to do things that were lost for a while, that can be a blessing that they wouldn't have had if they hadn't had the illness, if that's not sounding too C.S. Lewis about the whole thing! But that does raise the question for Christians, the big question as ever 'why does a good God allow bad things?' Because people are dying of this, overwhelmingly this is more a bad thing than a good thing?

L It is a bad thing. I think while this is very bad and it has affected us all, I think we need still to keep it in context. It is not as bad as the suffering that is happening around the world where people die of hunger or because of war. So yes, it is bad, and it has affected rich and poor alike, which is why it's probably been so prevalent in our mind: it hasn't just affected the usual people at the bottom of the pile, this has been different.

A Do you think it's helpful as a minister, to preach and teach theodical 'answers' to people's questions—do they find that helpful? I'm reminded of the quote that says 'theodical discourse can only add to the world's evils, not remove or illuminate them'.[1]

L I'm not sure I've yet had many people asking 'why has God allowed this?' and that may be because it hasn't yet touched us personally in terms of people we've lost. It's been more a case of 'this is inconvenient and a bit weird' really. I'm sure we will get to that place where people start to ask 'why' when they've lost someone close to them, and when we do, then I think I want to explore that more in terms of 'where is God' not 'why does God allow', and I'd want to argue that God is right there in the midst of our suffering because He chooses to be…

A Yes, I've been drawn a little to the idea of process theology[2] recently, and I'm not sure I've got my head around it yet—but one of the things it has corrected for me is a belief I've held a little too strongly that God is 'outside' of the space-time continuum and sees the end from the beginning, and while that's true, it makes Him rather remote and not involved enough. Do you want to say something about God's involvement?

L I suppose I'd like to say it's not an either/or: it's very important when we're going through seismic changes, that we do understand that God does have an outside view, and can see the end from the beginning[3]—that's very comforting—but we also need to know that God is involved, that God has chosen to be part of our human lives, and therefore to be affected by what happens to us. I suppose Moltmann is the theologian to go to there,[4] and he writes very helpfully about how God has chosen, has covenanted, to be affected by how we behave and what happens to us, to the point of suffering with us, and that finds it's ultimate expression in His choice to suffer on the cross in our place, to empty himself and know what it's like to be godless, abandoned and to suffer. So, I think it's very important that we take an understanding of God like that into an experience like this. But I wouldn't want to throw out the other understanding of God having a wider view, seeing the end from the beginning, because I think we need that as well.

A Yeah, and of course in that ultimate expression on the cross, that is of course the ultimate expression of love and in difficult times surely what the church should be doing is 'loving'. As a doctor I know that patients need therapies that are effective but they also need kindness.

L Indeed, and the challenge for the church is to find practical ways to love people, when our whole way of doing it has been centred around gathering together. Health workers are much more at the coalface of showing love because they are doing it in a practical way, putting themselves in danger, dealing with vulnerable people. You and I both, as ex-medical people, know that this is costly, yet in some ways it is an easier way to express love…

A One of the problems with this virus of course is how it isolates people, even those without the virus—in care homes with no visitors for instance, they may be missing out on the human kindness aspect, which is a big part of what the gospel is trying to achieve in us.

L I think kindness is very underrated. When I teach on pastoral care for elderly people I emphasise kindness and how small expressions of kindness can mean an awful lot. When I was nursing that was very much part of my mentality: a lot of that is built in to how we touch people, how we interact, so showing real kindness in the way that you wash someone who is feeling really unwell can make a huge difference rather than a cursory quick wash. We are limited in how we can do those things now. I'm not sure how much kindness I can convey in a phone-call every couple of days, or a meal dropped off,

or bits of shopping, but I'm hoping that's one of the ways that we can show the kindness of God to people, in those very small things, that may feel like large things to the person on the receiving end. And this requires some kind of emptying of ourselves, we need to follow a christlike pattern. We could just sit in our houses, watch the news all day and dwell on how this affects us. We are not able to see our children for the foreseeable future. One is isolating already and the other is too far away. We could sit at home and dwell on how this affects us but that would only increase our anxiety and be very counterproductive, whereas some form of 'kenosis', emptying ourselves and pouring ourselves into what might be required of us, me as a minister and you as a former doctor…

A Yes, I'm waiting for 'the letter' to come in the next couple of days telling me I've been re-registered and I can get back on the frontline. And there's a part of me that sees that as a great opportunity to put one's faith and belief into practice—that's almost one of the other blessings, to be blessed to be in the position as ministers and healthcare professionals, that we can actually do something 'useful'.

L That takes us back to our first point that we must give people a lot of space to be anxious, when many of the coping mechanisms to deal with anxiety, the gathering together, the keeping things in perspective and the doing something for someone else, have been taken away, particularly from our over-70s. I think that's a very profound loss for them that affects their ability to look beyond themselves.

I think that as theologians and ministers, we must be very careful not to offer trite explanations of what is going on, but we need to allow others to explore how horrible this is, and to say it as it is, and to be grieving and be frightened—it's not unspiritual to be frightened, Jesus was frightened in the face of his suffering.

But we also have a God-given opportunity to empty ourselves somewhat, and to look to the bigger picture—there is hope. This too will pass, and I have a hope that we may learn from this something that affects how we behave in the future. The cynical may say that three days back into normal, and we'll take it all for granted again, but I'd like to hope that this will not be the case, that we might actually value our relationships with one-another more as a result of this experience for quite some time.

***Alan is a GP and Lisa is in ministry at Croxley Green BC. Contact them on APKerry@aol.com and LKKerry@aol.com.***

**Notes to text**

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodicy accessed 20th March 2020

2. See, for example, Thomas Jay Oord. *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence.* IVP,, 2015.

3. Isaiah 46:10.

4. Moltmann, Jürgen. *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*. London: SCM, 1984.

# Divine suffering and pastoral practice

## by Christopher Shenton Brown

Fourteen years ago, I was invited by two close Christian friends to their home to celebrate the birth of their second son. I had the privilege of holding this precious new life and sharing in the joy of his safe arrival. However, as the months passed both mother and father began to notice that their second son was not developing like their first, and after many tests their doctor confirmed that their son had a neurological developmental delay condition that resulted in a significant learning and physical disability. Their journey from that point has been, and continues to be, a complex mix of emotions and experiences that have brought times of great darkness, exhaustion, and doubt, but also of great light, joy, and love. Theologian Frances Young, herself a mother of a disabled son, summarises the journey well: 'There has been no easy triumph, but the pain is shot through with joy, and the joy is pierced with pain'.[1]

Their continuing story has raised many, many questions about life, faith, salvation, suffering, God, love, and the future, and as a Minister-in-Training such questions have caused me to think deeply about my understanding of God with regard to suffering, as well as my pastoral response. In this article I will explore how an understanding of divine suffering might shape and be shaped by the pastoral response to suffering.

### The centrality of the Cross

The ongoing suffering experienced by my friends compels me to wrestle with theodicy, which explores how one can believe that God is both good and sovereign in the face of the world's evil and suffering.[2] Searching the scriptures quickly leads to the passion and cross of Jesus Christ, the suffering and death of the Son of God, and to his cry of dereliction: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34, NRSV). Clarke, therefore, writes: 'It is the cross which functions both as initiator and critic of what theologians can and must say about suffering and God'.[3] Furthermore, Mark tells us that "when the centurion…saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'" (15:39). Drawing on the work of Barth,[4] Clarke is surely correct when he writes that the 'centurion's confession asserts the true identity of the Godforsaken Jesus […and] that divine revelation occurs in the very midst of forsakenness'.[5] Therefore, we must 'take seriously the possibility that...Jesus' words also point us to the deeper level of divine suffering'.[6]

**The love of God**

My friends love their son, and want to do everything possible to ensure his life is as good, meaningful, and comfortable as possible, and this causes them to suffer. The New Testament emphatically declares that God is love and acts in love towards the fallen and suffering creation (1 John 4:8; John 3:16; Romans 5:8), primarily through the giving of his Son who suffered with creation and for its redemption. The Hebrew scriptures speak of God's steadfast love (Exodus 34:6-7), his knowing the suffering of his people (Exodus 3:7) and of his compassion, anger, tenderness and regret (Hosea 11:8, Genesis 6:7). Therefore, the biblical narrative appears to show that the love of God is one that is real, that affects and is affected, is sacrificial and one that suffers. Indeed, there appears to be a deep resonance between the love of God and of humankind, between what I see demonstrated in the parental love of my friends and that which is magnified and perfected in the love of God.

Yet is this a justified interpretation of the biblical narrative? Other passages make a clear distinction between the divine and the human (Isaiah 40:18,25), and others intentionally use anthropomorphic language to describe certain attributes of God (Isaiah 59:1). The answer is far from straightforward, for I must hold together God's transcendent divinity on the one hand, and his revelation in the man Jesus on the other; a God who may suffer and yet who remains God.[7]

Theologians from the 20th century, writing in the wake of the immense suffering caused by WW2, rediscovered within the biblical narrative and especially in the cross of Jesus a God whose love for the world has caused him to suffer with and for the world. Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) wrote that 'only the suffering God can help'.[8] Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel (1907-1972) spoke of the Old Testament prophets' theology as being a theology of divine pathos.[9] Yet it was Jürgen Moltmann who truly awoke the Christian church to the suffering of God, in his work *The Crucified God*. Moltmann writes: 'Whoever is capable of love is also capable of suffering, because he [sic] is open to the suffering that love brings with it, although he is always able to surmount that suffering because of love'.[10]

*the love of God is one that is real, that affects and is affected, is sacrificial and one that suffers*

However, the Catholic theologian Weinandy strongly refutes the notion that God suffers since his 'immutable and impassible nature… demands that God be immune from

suffering'.[11] Weinandy focuses on God's 'ontological distinctness', and his being 'Wholly Other',[12] to safeguard the Creator-created relationship and to declare that God 'does not undergo some passible changes of state whereby he experiences some form of divine emotional…distress'.[13] The doctrine of divine impassibility was defined in the Patristic period where Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoic philosophical influences were strong, not least the idea of God must be immune from suffering, and has endured until the 20th century when it was robustly challenged.

Yet, as Moltmann rightly asks: 'how can an impassible God feel compassion? How can a God incapable of suffering love?'[14] It appears that Weinandy senses this problem, since he frequently claims that God 'cannot experience emotional changes of state' and yet is 'utterly passionate in his love, mercy and compassion'.[15] Weinandy wants to purge God's love and compassion of any 'sinful selfish desires and ends' and safeguard God from any loss of good,[16] which leads Weinandy to claim therefore that 'a God who does not suffer is more loving, compassionate, and merciful'.[17]

There are elements here that are attractive and almost persuasive, since Weinandy skilfully describes how an impassible God can be passionate in love. Yet in driving a wedge between God's love and ours, which he must do, Weinandy risks removing all analogy between them, rendering it essentially meaningless to humankind. Weinandy frequently invokes the mystery of God to explain his position,[18] and sometimes rightly so, but it often leaves the reader feeling as though every description of God must only be a signpost to something more complex, transcendent or incomprehensible, which offers little for those who suffer.

Fiddes is surely right when he states that '[t]o love is to be in relationship where what the loved one does alter one's own experience', and so 'God not only suffers but is changed by those whom God loves',[19] yet in a way where God's love is sufficient to 'absorb suffering' and yet 'not be degraded by it'.[20] Although Weinandy is correct to state that love does not require suffering to be authentic,[21] the only time that could be true is in the absence of suffering, for when love encounters suffering in those who are loved then authentic love must suffer, as in the case of my friends, and, I would argue, in the case of God when the Son released his cry of dereliction.

### The vulnerability of God

My friends' experience has highlighted to me the vulnerability of love: as my friends love their son they make themselves vulnerable to whatever may happen as a consequence of that love. Vanstone explores the meaning of παραδίδωμι, 'to hand over',[22] in the passion and death of Jesus, and explains how Jesus goes from being the 'active and initiating subject' to the 'recipient, the object, of what is done'.[23] Jesus made himself vulnerable in that he placed himself into the hands of humankind and thus became exposed to whatever we do.[24] This concept of vulnerability is of fundamental importance for Moltmann,[25] Fiddes,[26] and Clarke,

since it 'offers a way of understanding God's genuine openness to the world', in which God voluntarily experiences what is other to the divine life, while remaining truly divine.[27]

Divine vulnerability demonstrates God's solidarity with humanity in suffering[28] and authenticates his compassion, and thus is a real source of comfort, consolation, strength and hope. Furthermore, divine vulnerability does not necessarily lead to Weinandy's accusation that a suffering God is a 'helpless victim'. I would argue that in some meaningful sense God remains sovereign over his suffering in such a way that does not dilute his experience of suffering, for although there are times when we are helpless victims, there are others in which we are not, but where we can manage our suffering and its impact on our lives.

## The trinitarian God

The suffering of my friends is not limited to them as parents but is experienced by all those who are connected to them by mutual love. Moltmann writes of how the cross compels us to 'enter into the inner-trinitarian tensions and relationships of God'.[29] If Gregory of Nyssa (*ca*335-394) is right that God acts in Trinity,[30] then I would argue that God therefore experiences in Trinity, so that what affects one member affects them all, yet in distinct ways. So that through the Spirit the Son sacrifices himself on the cross and experiences the abandonment of the Father, and the Father then suffers the loss of his Son.[31]

Despite Weinandy strongly refuting the notion of suffering within the Trinity because of God's absolute impassibility,[32] he still attributes grief and sorrow to the Father, albeit metaphorically since actual grief would impoverish his relationship with humanity.[33] However, grief without suffering is nonsensical and a concept completely alien to humankind. Furthermore, from the experience of my friends, the deepest and richest relationships are those where vulnerable love has caused mutual suffering, where friends and family have journeyed together and suffered together in a very real way, not stood at a distance, uninvolved, unmoved, unaffected as impassibility might suggest.

Fiddes helpfully speaks of the 'movements of suffering love',[34] where 'God suffers not only "with" but "as" and "in" us in the interweaving relationship of the divine dance'.[35] Although this enters into the mystery of God, as Weinandy often does, this offers a better understanding of the relationship between Trinity and humankind that encompasses mutual suffering and love, suffering that is accepted and transformed into glory.[36]

## The suffering of God

While God remains the 'Wholly Other', this does not necessarily result in an impassible God, for the doctrine of impassibility is found wanting when placed alongside the biblical

narrative of the cross and the narrative of my friends' suffering. The concept of vulnerability is the key that has unlocked my understanding of divine suffering, for it safeguards God's divinity and his being the 'Wholly Other', while opening up the possibility of divine suffering; a possibility that was realised when the Son voluntarily suffered and died on the cross for the redemption of creation. A God who suffers is not, as Weinandy claims, impotent to the causes of suffering and unable to overcome evil, rather, the God who suffers is more impassioned to end suffering and destroy its causes, and to transform it according to his divine purposes, just as he transformed death on the cross into new resurrection life.

**Pastoral application**

How will this understanding of God impact my pastoral ministry? First, the doctrine of impassibility portrays God's love in response to suffering as being unmoved, unaffected, and unchanged, and this is pastorally and theologically inadequate. Genuine human suffering demands not fidelity to a philosophical argument, but a real encounter with the authentic love and compassion of the suffering God, revealed in and supported by God's revelation in Jesus and the cross. Therefore, in my pastoral ministry, if I am authentically to indwell the narrative of the cross, I cannot be distant, unmoved, unaffected, or unchanged by the suffering within the church or indeed in the community; rather I must be prepared to journey with those who suffer in such a way that I am willing to sacrifice my own welfare to demonstrate the authentic love and compassion of God, while knowing that the vulnerable God is also the God of the resurrection and so am given great hope for the future. Furthermore, the mutual love and vulnerability between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit provides a model for community life within the church which pastors are to plant, nurture and nourish, as well as demonstrate in their own ministries, so that mutual suffering, love, and hope are experienced within that community.

There is, however, an additional element that is often ignored in much of the literature on the suffering God: that of suffering with Christ so that we might become like Christ. Although Eiesland understandably protests against promoting virtuous suffering, especially when applied to disability,[37] we must not ignore the New Testament's voice on suffering being a part of discipleship (1 Peter 2:18-23). In 387AD, John Chrysostom delivered a sermon on the reasons why God would allow his children to suffer, and spoke of humility, refinement, endurance, perseverance, true devotion, wisdom, opportunities for comfort and forgiveness, encouragement, and hope.[38] Therefore, with wisdom and pastoral sensitivity, this element must be brought alongside those already discussed to give a fuller picture of suffering, while ensuring that this does not become the only answer to suffering, for, as Young writes, 'this…fails to take seriously the profoundly destructive effect suffering can have'.[39] Indeed, there are contexts where such pastoral responses are not only inappropriate but theologically and pastorally inadequate, and where we must journey by faith alone,[40] while being consoled, encouraged and given

hope by the resurrection that transformed the suffering of God into glorious new and everlasting life.

## Conclusion

The experience that my friends have had, and continue to have, in caring for their son has caused me to wrestle with my understanding of God and my pastoral response to suffering. The times of great darkness, despair, fear and exhaustion have rendered many of my previous views as being too easy, cheap, and ultimately impotent in the face of such relentless suffering. Their experience has caused me to look again, in a much deeper way, at the cross of Jesus Christ, the place of supreme suffering in the Christian faith, to try and discover what the biblical narrative reveals about God and suffering in light of their narrative of suffering. In so doing, I have discovered the vulnerable love of the trinitarian God, who has entered into our suffering in a supremely meaningful way. Indeed, this love of God gives us great confidence and assurance that God is far from unmoved, unaffected or unchanged by our suffering, but that his love compels him to draw near to us, enter our suffering, pour out his authentic compassion upon us, call us to endurance, and give us hope of our participation in the new creation, where suffering will no longer exist, where God "will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

***Christopher Brown is pastor at Market Harborough Baptist Church. He can be contacted on revcsbrown@gmail.com.***

## Notes to text

1. F. Young, *Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering*. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990, p50.

2. S. B. Ferguson & D. F. Wright (eds), *New Dictionary of Theology.* Leicester: IVP, 1988, p679.

3. A. Clarke, *A Cry in the Darkness—The Forsakenness of Jesus in Scripture, Theology and Experience*. Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2002, p13.

4. *ibid*, p215.

5. *ibid*, p67.

6. *ibid*, p14.

7. P. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*. Oxford: OUP, 1988, p2.

8. D. Bonhoeffer, 'Letter to Eberhard Bethge' in *Letters and Papers from Prison* (ed R. Fuller). NY: Macmillan, London: SCM, 1971, pp359-61, in McGrath, *Theology Reader*, p46.

9. J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*. London: SCM, 1981, p25.

10. J. Moltmann in "The 'Crucified God': God and the Trinity Today"; in J. B. Metz (ed), *New Questions on God.* NY: Herder & Herder, 1972, pp31-5 in McGrath, *Theology Reader,* pp192,193.

11. T. G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000, p153.

12. *ibid*, pp46, 53.

13. *ibid,* pp153,154.

14. J. Moltmann, 'The Passibility or Impassibility of God', in Clarke, Moore (eds), *Within the Love of God,* p114.

15. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?,* pp38,39.

16. *ibid*, pp158,160.

17. *ibid*, p159.

18. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?,* p32.

19. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p171.

20. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p183.

21. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?,* p160.

22. Vanstone, *The Stature*, pp5-16.

23. *ibid*, pp20,21.

24. *ibid*, p89.

25. Moltmann, *The Trinity*, p23.

26. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p152.

27. Clarke, *A Cry in the Darkness*, p218.

28. Clarke, *A Cry in the Darkness*, p93.

29. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p204.

30. Gregory of Nyssa, *Ad Ablabium: Quod non sint tres dei*, in Gregorii Nysseni opera, ed Werner W. Jaeger, 3 vols, 1996, vol 3, part 1, pp37-52 in McGrath, *Theology Reader*, p162.

31. Moltmann, "The 'Crucified God': God and the Trinity Today"; in J. B. Metz (ed), *New Questions on God.* NY: Herder & Herder, 1972, pp31-5 in McGrath, *Theology Reader*, pp192,193.

32. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?,* pp153,158.

33. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?,* pp146,228.

34. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p162.

35. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p186.

36. Moltmann, *The Trinity*. London: SCM, 1981, p34.

37. N. L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God—Toward a Liberation Theology of Disability.* Nashville: Abingdon, 1994, p72.

38. F. Young, 'Apathos Epathen, in Clarke, Moore (eds), *Within the Love of God*, pp81,83.

39. *ibid*, p156.

40. Young, *Face to Face*, pp226,227.

# Baptists and ecumenism today

## by Paul Goodliff

There is still a whiff of controversy for some Baptists about the ecumenical world, a sense of compromise for deeply held convictions, or of time better spent on more important matters. However, for most Baptists, both in theory and in practice, ecumenical collaboration is now so much a part of what it means to be 'Baptist' as to have passed beyond the controversies of earlier generations. As recently as the 1989 Assembly it had to be argued that the Baptist Union should join the new ecumenical instruments established out of the Swanwick Declaration —Churches Together in England (CTE) and Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI). John Briggs presented the proposal to join on behalf of the Advisory Committee on Church Relations (interestingly, a committee for which I was the last chair before its dissolution in the early 2000s) and this was seconded by Douglas McBain, Metropolitan Superintendent (and previously my pastor at Lewin Road Baptist Church in Streatham) arguing that now was 'not the time to retreat into a Baptist ghetto'.[1] An amendment proposed 'associate membership' of the new bodies, but this was not carried, and 74% of those voting supported full membership. So, the Baptist Union became a member of the new instruments, as it had previously been a member of the British Council of Churches, The Conference of European Churches (CEC) and The World Council of Churches (WCC) and remains so to this day.

### Baptists as ecumenical leaders

Indeed, Baptists had been instrumental in the founding of all those bodies, with the General Secretary of the Union, Dr Ernest Payne, playing a significant role, among others. Over the past 70 years of the ecumenical journey Baptists have often 'punched above their weight' in leadership and engagement, contradicting the perceived reluctance by congregations and ministers fully to embrace the ecumenical world. In the WCC, English Baptists have often held places in its structures and worked as staff members (Dr Myra Blyth worked for the WCC from 1988-1999, after which she became BUGB Assistant General Secretary; Dr Simon Oxley held the role from 1996-2008; while Ruth Bottoms was Convenor of the WCC Mission and Evangelism Commission while minister at Wendover and Ecumenical Officer for Bedfordshire). Dr Keith Clements, following a period working for CTBI, was General Secretary of the Conference of European Churches from 1997-2005. Dr David Goodbourn was General

Secretary of the British Council of Churches as it transitioned to CTBI (1999-2005) and others such as Roger Nunn and John Nicholson held ecumenical posts, while Dr David Spriggs worked for the Evangelical Alliance and David Staple served as General Secretary of the Free Church Federal Council. The first Ecumenical Moderator for Milton Keynes was Hugh Cross, following a stint at the BCC from 1980-1990, and its third was Dr Mary Cotes, 2003-2011. Across the border into Wales, Dr Gethin Abraham -Williams was General Secretary of Cytun, the Welsh national ecumenical instrument, from 1998-2006. Many others have served as county ecumenical officers over the decades.

At the moment we have Baptist ministers in leadership of three of the four national ecumenical posts in England: Roger Sutton leads the new ecumenical movement, Gather; Gavin Calver is the newly appointed General Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance; and I am General Secretary of Churches Together in England. It almost seems that Baptists currently have more than their 'fair share' of the leadership of the ecumenical world.

### Local ecumenism

On the ground, Baptists are generally engaged ecumenically, and not just in those churches that are Local Ecumenical Partnerships, such as single-congregation LEPs Bar Hill near Cambridge, Pontypridd or Peach Croft, Abingdon, or multi-congregations in partnership such as Ock Street, Abingdon or Knowle West in Bristol. The typical Baptist church is in a Churches Together group, or equivalent, works ecumenically in social action and compassionate service and will share in evangelistic endeavour. Its minister will meet regularly with other clergy in the vicinity and will participate in the long-standing Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and the more recent Thy Kingdom Come season of prayer from Ascension to Pentecost. It is important to remember how recent this kind of ecumenical work is—less than 50 years after half a century of animosity and indifference—and how unusual on a global scale is ecumenism of this breadth.

Elsewhere old suspicions between Catholics and Protestants, or between Evangelicals and Pentecostals on the one hand, and the historic churches of the Reformation and the Orthodox on the other, still are deeply embedded. Remnants of those old suspicions remain stubbornly present within England, too, but the reality of 50 member churches in CTE comprising at least six families or traditions—Anglican, Catholic, Free Church, Pentecostal, Orthodox and others—and with such breadth and depth of engagement, is a cause of thanksgiving (if you think ecumenism is good, of course!). Churches as varied as the Antiochian Orthodox Church, The Church of God of Prophecy (mainly a Black majority church of Caribbean origins in UK) and the New Church networks Pioneer and

Ichthus are members; Pentecostal churches New Testament Assembly and The New Testament Church of God journey with Free churches Congregational Fellowship, Moravian Church, Baptists Together and the Methodist Church; historic English Pentecostals, The Apostolic Church, Elim and Assemblies of God join the African-originated Redeemed Christian Church of God, Presbyterian Church of Ghana and the Unification Council of Cherubim and Seraphim Churches; and both Eastern Orthodox Serbian and Russian Patriarchates with Oriental Orthodox Copts and Malankara Syrian Church (Indian Orthodox) walk with Anglicans and Catholics. It is a truly extraordinarily diverse and rich mix.

The origins of such diversity are not always a sign of ancient or more modern church separation. Many of the newer member churches from Orthodox and Pentecostal traditions reflect the diversity of backgrounds successive waves of migrants have brought to England, and especially its larger cities. Church is one of the ways in which migrant communities retain some hold on their culture and birth language. Worshipping in a language you are familiar with is important when so much else for the first generation migrant is strange, while passing on that culture to successive generations involves its religious dimension too, be that Orthodox or Pentecostal. The highlight of my 2019 Christmas was preaching in London at the carol service for the St James Mar Thomas Church, with its mix of languages, beautiful choirs and typical south Indian dress—oh, and instead of mince pies, we had curry to eat afterwards. That congregation, drawn from across South East England, was multigenerational (babes in arms to the elderly) and had deep roots in both its Indian culture and, now, several generations of families born in England.

*The typical Baptist church is in a Churches Together group, or equivalent, works ecumenically in social action and compassionate service and will share in evangelistic*

So, the mix of cultures and churches, traditions and denominations is one aspect of ecumenism today in which Baptists play their part. All is made even richer when from within a church tradition can be found multicultural and linguistic diversity. Just think of our Baptist family, with its Ghanaian, Brazilian and Congolese strands: multicultural, but all Baptist. That diversity is replicated for Methodists, Catholics and others, making English Christianity among the most

diverse anywhere on earth. CTE aims to embrace as much of that diversity as wish to be associated with it, and to truly reflect English Christianity in all of its vibrancy.

## New developments

There is a distinct feel that whatever 'old-school' ecumenism was, it has run its course. It was partly idealistic, believing that visible unity through church merger was possible. The United Reformed Church arose in that heady atmosphere, amalgamating the majority of Presbyterians and the Congregationalists, churches of the Reformation, in one new denomination at the vanguard of further church union. That union never happened, and whether appeals for church unity of Free Churches and the Church of England under an Anglican episcopal structure of a century ago, or more recent attempts to unite Methodists and the Church of England, our visible disunity remains stubbornly evident. Even Baptists tried their own church union when approached by the Independent Methodists (IMs) in the 2000s, but in the end the bridge to union could not be fully crossed by the IMs, and so the two denominations remain separate, yet both members of the Free Churches Group and CTE.

In that light, what future for ecumenism? The idea of full visible unity remains an idealistic goal, but how to reach it through the traditional 'faith and order' dialogues is elusive. There are continuing conversations between Anglicans and Methodists (although that took a pause in 2019 with the failure to reach agreement on new mechanisms for shared ministry at the Church of England Synod) and The English and Welsh Anglicans with their Catholic sisters and brothers (EWARC for the curious), a long-standing dialogue with which I have become involved as CTE representative. Newer conversations are beginning between Pentecostals and Orthodox, building on recent work between Anglicans and Pentecostals, and I think there is plenty to discover from one another should Baptists ever decide to enter into conversation with Pentecostals. But in truth, the energy has gone from such conversations and the hope that it might lead to church unions is largely forlorn these days. In its place I identify four new areas for exploration.

***1. Greater flexibility in local ecumenism.*** In 2019 two developments made it easier for churches to enter into collaboration for worship and mission. A new framework for local unity in mission was published,[2] to which our own Baptist ecumenical officer, Hilary Treavis, contributed much. This identifies a number of ways in which engaging in mission together can be eased organisationally. Secondly new ecumenical canons were enacted by the Church of England that ease the ways in which non-Anglicans can minister in Anglican parishes. The spirit of both is to remove as much as possible that hinders effective mission.

***2. Receptive ecumenism***. A characterisation of older ecumenical approaches is

epitomised by the statement: 'we have much that you need to learn from us properly to be Christian, because we have more truth than you!' If you think that is rather unkind, just think about how frequently Catholics have been considered appropriate targets for evangelisation by Baptists—or how those with an episcopal structure and leadership have insisted that apostolic succession is vital for a full transmission of the Spirit through ordination, and failed to recognise the equal validity of Baptist or Pentecostal orders. Receptive ecumenism is more than a decade in the making and turns the statement on its head in a much more generous (and I think, godly) way. 'We do not possess the whole truth and so to be more fully Christian we have to learn from you. Please share your riches of faith and doctrine with us' sums up the approach, which has its origins in Durham and its Catholic theological faculty under Professor Paul Murray. I attended the first Receptive Ecumenism Conference near Durham in 2006, and subsequent ones have been held there again (2009) in the United States (2014) and in Canberra, Australia in 2017. The next one should be in the summer of 2020 in Sweden.

This new way of approaching the ecumenical task promises much, legitimates continuing diversity not as a failure but as a sign of the rich diversity of humankind, and aims to transform ecclesial practice by careful and generous-hearted listening to one another. In an age of social media echo-chambers, where listening is limited to those who are safe with one another, such listening is profoundly countercultural—and profoundly godly. CTE has produced a Receptive Ecumenism course for local groups of churches to disseminate this way of engaging with one another.[3]

***3. The ecumenism of spirituality***. Spiritual practices were once tightly policed by church traditions—evangelicals practised the quiet time, Catholics prayed the rosary, and Orthodox the Jesus Prayer, and there was precious little overlap. Let me simply note the space now occupied by the rich diversity of spiritualities acceptable to evangelicals and Catholics alike. 2020 has been designated the Year of the Bible by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, and working with Bible Society and others, a book that ordinary Catholics were discouraged to read half a century ago, is now being placed front and centre in Catholic spirituality. Language (and practices) of 'retreats', '*lectio divina'* and contemplative prayer is commonplace for evangelicals, while the charismatic practice *par excellence*—speaking in tongues—is accepted by some Catholics and widely by evangelicals (as witness the testimony of the evangelical Anglican, Archbishop Justin Welby, who 'prays in tongues' in his personal devotions daily). Being conducted in the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises is no longer the exclusive experience of Catholics, the ethos of Celtic spirituality, with its saints and places of pilgrimage, is embraced widely across the denominational spectrum, and the honouring of Mary is no longer solely to be found amongst Catholics and Orthodox. And, yes, it seems people from all shades of spirituality light candles these days, both in private prayers and in public worship.

Alongside the sometimes rather formal ecumenical practices of walks of witness, shared services in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and Lenten ecumenical study groups there has emerged a much more widely adopted diversity of spiritual practices. This mirrors the vernacular ecumenism in many local congregations and parishes where denominational allegiances and traditions of origin count for less than the style of worship, provision for families and sense of missional purpose. Baptist churches are full of Anglicans, Pentecostals and Catholics, who remain in some ways wedded to those origins but who happily belong to the Baptist church. In the last church I pastored, in Abingdon, Oxfordshire, members of the church included those who had recently worshipped in a Roman Catholic parish, the wife of an Anglican priest who served as one of the deacons (and whose husband attended whenever he was not taking services elsewhere), a couple from an evangelical free church, and my co-pastor, who grew up among the Brethren. Such diversity in origins is now commonplace across the spectrum of churches, with possibly the exception of the Orthodox (although, even here, there are plenty of former Anglicans and Catholics who find Orthodoxy to be their spiritual home).

All this means that we no longer find our ecumenical partners' spiritualities strange, because it is likely that we will have encountered them somewhere within our own family of churches and might even practice some of them ourselves, be that Celtic or Catholic or Pentecostal. This new ecumenism of spirituality enables us to find one another less strange and to benefit from one another—something I find each year I teach predominantly catholic spirituality in my half of the Spurgeon's MTh course in Christian Spirituality.

***4. Juridical ecumenism***. Juridical ecumenism is a recent development in ecumenical work and rather like receptive ecumenism flips the question that partners ask one another, from 'what must you learn from me' to 'what do I need to learn from you', juridical ecumenism changes the perception that canon law or church regulations restricts ecumenical working to see how it might enable and enrich ecumenical working.

The roots of the Christian Law Project and its Panel of Experts, in its current iteration, go back to a project undertaken by Professor Norman Doe of Cardiff University Law School and Director of the Centre for Law and Religion at that University. He was approached to review canon law in the various jurisdictions of the Anglican Communion and produced a document that reviewed the similarities between them that has gained an informal authoritative status within the Communion. When Anglican Provinces review canon law, or require new canons to be produced, they use this *Principles of Canon Law Common to the Churches of the Anglican Communion* as a guide.

A second step was to take this working model and apply it to a broader ecumenical

context, and so, with Professor Mark Hill QC (a working barrister in ecclesiastical law, academic canon lawyer and chancellor of a number of Church of England Dioceses), and Prof Norman Doe as its chairs, the Christian Law Project was started. This sought to apply the same principles of studying comparative law within one ecclesial tradition (Anglicans) to a broader ecumenical group. In November 2013 an invited symposium was convened at the Venerable English College in Rome, comprising canon lawyers and theologians attending in a personal capacity. Peter Stevenson of South Wales Baptist College attended as the Baptist until 2015, when I replaced him and continue to hold that position on the Panel. We were not delegated to attend by our church or tradition, but were expected to accurately reflect the laws, regulations, norms and polity of their respective tradition. The panel set about evaluating the extent to which there are principles of Christian law common to the traditions of Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, Methodists, Reformed, Lutherans, Presbyterian, Pentecostals, Quakers and Baptists. A principle of Christian law is a maxim of general applicability, induced from the similarities of the laws and regulations of the churches, and which expresses a basic theological truth or ethical value that underlies the juridical systems of the churches.

The Panel met each year for four years, developing the principles that were published in the *Ecclesiastical Law Journal*[4] in 2017, and subsequently in 2017 continued its work in Geneva, where a meeting with the Director of the WCC Faith and Order Commission, Prof Odair Pedroso Mateus, was held. This is an interesting and important new strand to ecumenical working, in its early days.

Ecumenism may have become 'the new norm', and is no longer controversial, but it has entered into something of an 'ecumenical winter'. It is my hope and prayer that these new developments will bring about a new spring to ecumenism—or at least 'put a spring' in our ecumenical steps.

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**Notes to text**

1.Ian M. Randall, *English Baptists of the Twentieth Century, A History of the English Baptists,* vol. 4. Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 2005, p447.

2.This can be found on the CTE website at https://www.cte.org.uk/Articles/465286/Home/Resources/Local_Ecumenism/A_New_Framework/A_new_framework.aspx

3.*Embracing the Other*, https://www.cte.org.uk/Groups/306183/Home/Resources/Theology/Receptive_Ecumenism/Resources/Embracing_the_Other.aspx

4.Mark Hill & Norman Doe, "Principles of Christian Law", in *Ecclesiastical Law Journal,* vol 19, 2017, 138–155.

# The Celtic soul-friend today

## by Andy Scholes

*The Christian life is such that no one grows spiritually without some help from others. Strictly speaking, there are no self-taught saints.*[1] Assuming that this is true, I am suggesting that growth in the Christian life comes through three main channels: the gathered congregation; 1:1 approaches; and (sitting somewhere between the two) the small group setting.[2] This article is going to focus on the 1:1 approach, and more specifically it will introduce the Celtic soul-friend, exploring the origins and early influences of such a figure.

When illustrating the importance of the soul-friend within early Celtic Christianity a phrase often attributed to Brigit states that 'a person without a soul-friend is like a body without a head'.[3] In a similar vein it is claimed that the soul-friend is 'perhaps the greatest legacy that the Early Celtic Church passed on to the universal church'.[4] In fact, 'Christian Celts believed that soul-friends were crucial to human growth and spiritual development';[5] indeed, 'everyone was expected to have an *anamchara'*.[6]

While these quotes do not indicate the nature of the role, they do point to something of its importance within early Celtic Christianity. If that is so, it is surely worthy of further exploration—especially in the light of a growth of interest in Celtic Christianity more generally and also 1:1 relationships in relation to spiritual formation.

The quote ascribed to Brigit provokes two things. First, there is some debate as to the exact identity of Brigit.[7] So what? you may be thinking! Well, this helps us to appreciate something that is symptomatic of the wider reality when it comes to this particular period in church history.[8] The second thing worth noting is that her identity hints at a wider context in which the soul-friend was found, and we will return to this shortly.

Let's consider the uncertainty around the identity of Brigit. This points to the reality that the amount that can be claimed with certainty from this time period is small: 'we cannot truly know how these people [the early Celtic Christians] thought, why they did what they did. Each of us must weave the available information into our own pattern'.[9] This lack of knowledge has obvious consequences for our exploration of soul-friendship and a degree of caution is needed. The content of this article has been informed by my personal reading and by interviews with people currently linked to communities in Britain with a Celtic Christian influence—specifically the Iona Community, the Community of Aidan and Hilda and the Northumbria Community.

When it comes to soul-friendship, Bradley states that 'there are tantalisingly few references to this particular feature of monastic life although it seems that every monk had a soul friend'.[10] He later writes that 'it is difficult to determine to what extent the figure of the *anamchara*[11] was found outside the bounds of the monastic vallum'.[12] If the soul-friend is restricted to a monastic community then it roots soul-friendship in a particular context, which becomes important if we are to consider any contemporary application.

There are several reasons for the scarcity of references. First, it is highly likely that many lay people would not be able read or write and so could not record their experiences of soul -friendship.[13] Indeed one author suggests that the early monks did not write anything down[14]—this is perhaps stretching the reality, but it was likely that the culture was *predominantly* oral. Another reason for the scarcity of written records is that they may have been lost or destroyed at the time of the Norse invasions.[15]

The scarcity could also be explained by it being such an integral part of everyday monastic life that it was not thought necessary constantly to refer to it. Indeed, if it was quite an intimate, private 1:1 relationship then by definition there will be little recorded for public consumption; further, those writing historically reliable accounts did not come from a Celtic background and so would be unlikely to use the term soul-friend—even though they were perhaps describing the characteristics of such a figure.

An example of this last possible explanation comes from the writings of Bede. While he does not use the term soul-friend,[16] this should come as no real surprise as he is writing with a particular stance—both geographically and ecclesiologically.[17] Bede has little to say generally about the monasteries[18]—the very places where soul-friendship was most common. That he does not explicitly use the term 'soul-friend' does not necessarily negate the existence of such relationships or in fact indicate how prominent or otherwise they were. What Bede does record is an example of the kind of interaction that took place between Cuthbert[19] and some of those individuals from across Britain who visited him on the island of Lindisfarne. He writes the following:

*...they confessed their sins, confided in him about their temptations, and laid open to him the common troubles of humanity they were labouring under—all in the hope of gaining consolation from so holy a man. They were not disappointed. No one left unconsoled, no one had to carry back the burdens he came with. Spirits that were chilled with sadness he could warm back to hope again with a pious word. Those beset with worry he brought back to thoughts of the joys of heaven.*[20]

Reed suggests that this was indeed an example of soul-friendship.[21] Whether this is hopeful reading back or a helpful observation should become more apparent as we go on. Suffice to say at this stage that although the term soul-friend is not used, the description of what took place is surely hinting at the essence and is more significant than the particular label given: the practice is more important than the name. This is relevant for any consideration of the

possible role of the soul-friend in contemporary discipleship. Do labels/titles matter, or is what actually happens more important than the name something is given? When are titles helpful and when do they hinder?

What Bede's description does not tell us is whether those visiting Cuthbert were monks, or whether the ministry extended beyond the monasteries. What is fairly certain is that these interactions were unlikely to be regular, given the distances and time taken to travel.

In the light of what has already been explored, we must be aware of the lack of first-hand evidence regarding the nature and role of the soul-friend in those times. Instead, we get hints and evocative descriptions and we note varying perceptions when it comes to the popularity and commonality of the soul-friend figure.

Returning to the quote ascribed to Brigit, there is a second point worth noting. Despite the uncertainty as to her identity, even the most sceptical[22] accept that she established an early Celtic monastery of some significance.[23] This matters when it comes to considering the primary context for soul-friendship. It seems to sit most naturally within communal or monastic life, and it is pertinent to note that monastic life came with various other practices. It is highly likely that within each monastery there was a daily rhythm of prayer and this was usually detailed within a common 'rule' to which a particular monastery would collectively commit. These early monastic rules, 'summarise the ethic of a monastery'.[24]

It was within the Celtic temperament to be quite autonomous,[25] and so while each monastery might have a strong sense of community, there was no unifying 'rule' across all the monasteries—each had its own. If the monasteries were united in any way it was through more informal family ties and friendships rather than adherence to a common 'code' or 'rule'.[26] The important point is that the soul-friend relationship was not a stand-alone thing but fitted within a wider way of life and was indeed balanced by a commitment to the wider community and also to time spent alone in one's cell.

Interestingly, the three modern communities with which I engaged also commit to a 'rule of life'[27] and here also, all three rules differ quite markedly.[28]

When it comes to the development of the soul-friend figure, two main influences emerge: the Desert Fathers and Mothers living in the Egyptian, Syrian and Palestinian region in the third, fourth and fifth centuries,[29] and the druidic or bard-type figures already present within pagan Celtic society.[30]

The druid/bard figures were included within a broader class of people in Celtic culture called *aes dana* or 'people of learning', and also comprising craftspeople, physicians and lawyers.[31] In fact, it is claimed that the highest position a druid could reach within society was equal to that of the tribal king. As a result they would have spiritual authority, would be held in high esteem, and could travel freely without prior permission.[32]

Simpson states that the druids were indeed 'the pagan equivalents to a soul friend. They can

be thought of as holistic advisors to top people, and soul-friends to the community as a whole'.[33] In reference to the relationship between Aidan[34] and a king called Oswald,[35] Bede writes, 'the king always listened humbly and readily to Aidan's advice and diligently set himself to establish and extend the Church of Christ throughout his kingdom'.[36] This hints at the advisory role and is possibly another way in which Bede writes of the soul-friend figure, without actually naming it.

While being influenced by the pagan druid figure, there were of course distinctives. The Christian soul-friend sought to place Christ at the centre of the wisdom, stories and advice they dispensed.[37] This is significant from a missional point of view in that the early Celtic Christians were willing to work with the culture of the day and find natural openings through which to introduce Christ.

While some authors are quite confident in their claims about the link between the druid and the soul-friend, others are more cautious. Meek writes that the 'druids in early Christian Ireland have left no records of their own, and we do not have a reliable picture of their pre-Christian function...the evidence gives little support to the common notion that they and their teachings were happily assimilated into the church. The opposite appears to have been the case'.[38]

Sheldrake too is cautious stating that 'without claiming more than can be proved, this role of mediating divine knowledge accords well with the later role of the Celtic "soul friends"'.[39] Finney is also guarded when considering pre-Christian Celtic religion. He writes that 'we know less of the beliefs of the Celts before they were converted...we know few of their myths since they forbade the use of writing...the religion of the Celtic lands at the time of the Christian missions is almost unknown'.[40] Although Chadwick notes that 'the druids remain obscure',[41] she does offer a suggestion as to what role they may have fulfilled stating that 'they seem to have been concerned with both education and law'.[42]

In this respect the druidic figures could well have influenced the soul-friend when it came to certain aspects of the role as hinted at in the quote from Bede above: those of confessor and prescriber of penances in relation to the community rule—penances that would have restorative rather than punitive goals.[43]

Despite not mentioning the soul-friend in her more contemporary account of the Celtic people, Chadwick does make mention of the rules of the monastic communities. Linked to the monastic rules are the penitentials, and linked to these penitentials are something that Chadwick describes as their most outstanding feature: 'the prominence of private penance as opposed to the public act of penance of the ancient continental Church'.[44] She goes on to note that 'in the Celtic Church private penance was imposed by a confessor...in which eremitism was an important feature'.[45] Could the soul-friend be the 'confessor'? As Chadwick writes about the confessor she also makes a link with the Desert Fathers writing that, 'here we feel ourselves very near to John Cassian and the Desert Fathers'.[46]

This leads onto the second main influence, and in relation to this Finney writes that 'it is often confidently asserted that the Celtic soul friend is a Christianisation of the druidic counsellor...that may be true but the Eastern Church provides an alternative source of the idea, for the Greek syncellus had the same function. Remembering the Celtic links with Eastern monasteries, the latter is at least as probable'.[47] Bradley too writes about the closeness and intimacy of the syncellus—the person with whom one shared a cell in the desert monastic community.[48]

The theme of confession is certainly present in the Desert Fathers: indeed, it has been noted that 'the way of confessing sin that developed within Celtic monasteries and churches was closely modelled on the practice of the Desert Fathers'.[49]

There is much that is commendable about this comparison and the Desert Father relationship also took place within a broader context that involved other practices such as extended periods of silence and solitude, facilitated by time alone in one's cell.[50]

Bradley sheds light on how the practices of confession and penance, and the community's rule found in the east among the Desert Fathers, came to influence the Celtic monastic communities in the west. The monastic rules adopted by the early Celtic monastic communities came through Cassian—himself a product of Egyptian desert monasticism[51]— as he travelled west to establish two monasteries in Marseilles.[52] Indeed 'he is a key part of the journey of Christianity from the East to the West'.[53]

In conclusion, this article has sought to introduce the soul-friend figure and provide some sort of background to the early development and context of such a figure. The two influences outlined above give hints about that and along with the writings of Bede, suggest that there was a strong focus on confession and penance.

It seems that the soul-friend figure was found largely—although perhaps not exclusively—within the context of monastic communities, which were governed by rules that differed from community to community but which nonetheless committed the members of that particular monastery to other practices as well.

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## Notes to text

1. S. Chan, *Spiritual Theology.* Downers Grove: IVP, 1998, p226.
2. Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, p226.
3. R. Simpson, *A Guide for Soul Friends.* Stowmarket: Kevin Mayhew, 2008, p88.
4. E. Sellner, *Stories of Celtic Soul Friends.* New York: Paulist Press, 2004, p36.
5. Sellner, *Stories of Celtic Soul Friends*, p7.
6. E. Sellner, *The Celtic Soul Friend.* Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2002, p181.
7. D. Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity.* Edinburgh: Hansel Press, 2000, p152.
8. I am taking it to be the 4th to the 7th century AD.

9. F. Sampson, *Visions and Voyages.* Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2007, p13.

10. I. Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven.* London: DLT, 2000, p102.

11. The term *anamchara* or variations of that term seem to be used interchangeably with 'soul-friend', so I am taking them to mean one and the same thing.

12. Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven*, p103.

13. Interview with Raine, A, 3/8/16.

14. U. Ó Maidín (transl), *The Celtic Monk: Rules and Writings of Early Irish Monks.* Spencer: Cistercian Publications, 1996, p9.

15. Ó Maidín (transl), *The Celtic Monk*, p9.

16. *The Age of Bede; The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.

17. Bede—although considered as writing a reliable record—is recognised as writing from a Roman perspective not a Celtic one.

18. D.H. Farmer, 'Introduction' in *Bede, Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, (transl by L. Sherley-Price). London: Penguin, 1990, p34.

19. *ca* 634-687. Bishop of Lindisfarne *ca* 685-687.

20. Bede, *The Age of Bede (*transl J.F. Webb). London: Penguin, 1998, p73.

21. S. Reed, *Creating Community.* Abingdon: BRF, 2013, pp63-64.

22. I. Bradley, *The Celtic Way.* London: DLT, 2003, p ix.

23. Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity*, p148.

24. B. Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity.* London: Continuum, 2005, p56.

25. Ó Maidín (transl), *The Celtic Monk*, p9.

26. Ó Maidín (transl), *The Celtic Monk*, p9.

27. Interview with Raine, A, 3/8/16; Interview with Reed, S, 20/7/16; Interview with Polhill, C, 22/8/2016.

28. www.aidanandhilda.org.uk/about-way.php; www.northumbriacommunity.org/who-we-are/our-rule-of-life/; iona.org.uk/movement/the-rule/

29. R.Simpson, *Soul Friendship.* London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1999, pp46-47; *cf* A. Ryrie, *The Desert Movement.* London: Canterbury Press, 2011, p1.

30. Sellner, *The Celtic Soul Friend*, p23.

31. Sellner, *The Celtic Soul Friend*, p26; *cf* R.Simpson, *Soul Friendship*, p62.

32. Sellner, *The Celtic Soul Friend*, p26.

33. Simpson, *Soul Friendship*, p62.

34. *ca* 590-651. The first Bishop of Lindisfarne: 635-651.

35. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, p146.

36. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, p147.

37. Simpson, *Soul Friendship,* pp66-67.

38. Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity*, p156.

39. Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds*, p20.

40. J. Finney, *Recovering the Past.* London: DLT, 1996, p133.

41. N. Chadwick*, The Celts.* London: Penguin, 1997, pp153-154.

42. Chadwick, *The Celts*, pp153-154.

43. T. O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology.* London: Continuum, 2000, pp54-56; *cf* JR, Walsh, & T. Bradley, *A History of the Irish Church: 400-700AD.* Dublin: Columba Press, 2003, p150.

44. Chadwick, *The Celts*, p215.

45. Chadwick, *The Celts*, p215.

46. Chadwick, *The Celts*, p215.

47. Finney, *Recovering the Past,* p133.

48. Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven*, p103.

49. Northumbria Community, *Soulfriendship*, p7.

50. Ryrie, *The Desert Movement*, pp121-122.

51. Ryrie, *The Desert Movement*, p162.

52. Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven*, p91.

53. Northumbria Community, *Soulfriendship*, p6.

# Retirement: a new stage in ministry

## by Paul Beasley-Murray

My earlier article, *Retired ministers matter* (*bmj* October 2019) summarised some of my findings on how Baptist ministers experience retirement, published in *Retirement matters for ministers* (College of Baptist Ministers, 2018). To my great interest the January edition of *bmj* contained two responses: *Retirement and ministerial identity* by John Colwell and *Retired ministers: free to serve!* by John Claydon. The editor has kindly allowed me to write a reply.

John Colwell argues that if we understand ministry as a 'call to do' (the so-called functional position), then our ministerial identity terminates at retirement; whereas if we understand ministry as a 'call to be' (the so-called ontological position) then retired ministers retain their calling. As I made clear in my research report, *Entering new territory: why are so many retired Baptist ministers worshipping in Anglican churches? What are the underlying theological issues?* (College of Baptist Ministers, 2019), I am unhappy with this argument. The very terms of the debate reflect a very different cultural context from what we find in the New Testament, where leaders were set apart through the laying-on-of hands to a particular task: see my in-depth study of *Ordination in the New Testament* in *Anyone for ordination?* (MARC 1993). Paul Goodliff in his major study on this issue (*Ministry, sacrament and representation*, Regent's Park College, p152) said that 'we cannot "just read the Bible" and ignore the intervening years', but I am not convinced. The danger of the 'ontological' position is that it leads to ministers having a special 'status' (as distinct from 'role'), which is essentially the Anglican and Roman Catholic understanding of priesthood. If Baptists are to be true to their heritage and be 'radical believers' who root their theology in the scriptures, then they have no other option than to accept that a have a functional approach to ministry.

Our calling to be 'ministers of the gospel' (a term I much prefer to 'ministers of the word and sacrament', which reflects a Reformed rather than a biblical understanding of ministry) does not end when we draw our pension. We may no longer lead churches, but we remain ministers of the gospel. In my next book *Fifty lessons in ministry: reflections on fifty years of ministry* (DLT, autumn 2020), I have adapted the model of ministry developed by Bruce and Kathryn Epperly as follows:

***Springtime***: The first congregational call, marked by adventure and tests of integrity.

***Summer:*** Midcareer, challenges of endurance and opportunities for transformation.

***Autumn:*** Retirement and ministry without leadership responsibilities.

**Winter:** Final season of God's call, marked by weakness, inner renewal and integrity.

Or, expressing these stages of ministry without the seasonal analogy:

- The years of youthful energy and enthusiasm (25-45 years).
- The years of growing maturity (45-65+years).
- The years of wisdom and fruitfulness (65+ years-).
- The years of contentment and letting go of everything but Christ.

Retirement marks not, as John Claydon suggests, the moment when we 'lay down the office of ministry', but the beginning of a new third stage of ministry. Recognising that the average life expectancy of ministers is five to seven years longer than others (John Ball, COE of the Church of England's Pension Board) and with most Baptist ministers retiring at 65, this means there are likely to be many years of ministry ahead of us. Indeed, Camilla Cavendish has argued that middle age only ends when we are 74 (*Extra time: ten lessons for an ageing world*, 2019). True, there does come that final stage where 'being' is no longer accompanied by 'doing', but that depends less on age and more upon health. Regional ministers and local pastors need to recognise the enormous potential that retired ministers have to offer and be proactive in supporting them in their ministries.

Retirement is a time when we are free to take new initiatives in ministry. It is an opportunity to serve God not on a church's terms, but 'on our terms'. This, however, does not necessarily mean, as John Claydon suggests, that we serve 'without accountability'. As a member of the College of Baptist Ministers I give an account of my ministry every time I update my Continuing Ministry Development profile.

When I was ordained on 10 October 1970, I was set apart not to be a 'pastor' but to be a 'missionary'. The Great Commission was at the heart of my ordination, and within less than a week I was on the high seas bound for Congo. True, I spent over 34 years of 'stipendiary' ministry in leading two churches, but I spent eight years in theological institutions helping to equip men and women to be ministers of the gospel. Much as I believe that the local church is 'the cutting edge of the kingdom', I have never equated ministry with leading a church.

I retired from stipendiary ministry at the age of 70. Although I no longer have the same energy levels I had when I was ordained at the age of 25, I still have a passion to 'live out the call' that God has on my life. ln part this is done within a local church where among other things I am often expounding the Bible seminar-style and leading a home group. In the context of the wider church I preach, teach, mentor, and write (in addition to my weekly blog I have written eight books in the past five or six years). In the wider world I

chair a Cambridge alumni group, I have been president of my Rotary club, I belong to a political party, I am a patron of young adults' hospice, and when I have time I am involved in role play in our local medical school. All these activities are aspects of ministry. So too are the dinners I get invited to because of Caroline (a senior coroner), where often I am called upon to say grace and am always involved in conversations about the Christian faith. My involvement with my eight grandchildren is also an extension of my ministry: indeed, it was because of them that I wrote *This is my story: a story of life, faith and ministry* (Wipf & Stock, 2018).

Of course, I recognise that what I have described is just my way of living out God's call. Other retired ministers live out their calling in many other ways, so more church-based and others more community-based. There is no one pattern for ministry in retirement. What is important is that we seek to be faithful to the call that God has on our lives.

I don't like the English word 'retirement', for it has such negative connotations. According to the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, to 'retire' means to 'withdraw', to 'retreat', to 'give ground', to 'cease to compete'. In one sense that is true: retirement does involve a leaving of an office or of employment. Yet, it is also about new beginnings and new opportunities.

A poem which sums up my experience of retirement is *The Terminus*, written by David Adam, the former Vicar of Lindisfarne.

*The Terminus is not where we stay,*
*It is the beginning of a new journey.*
*It is where we reach out beyond,*
*where we experience new adventures.*
*It is where we get off to enter new territory,*
*to explore new horizons, to extend our whole being.*
*It is a place touching the future.*
*It opens up new vistas.*
*It is the gateway to eternity*.

One thing is for sure: retirement is not the end of ministry but simply marks a new stage. Louis Armstrong, the great jazz musician, said: 'Musicians don't retire; they stop when there's no more music in them'. That is how most retired ministers feel. We still have divine music in our souls and we will only stop giving voice to that music when we join the greater chorus in heaven! The God who called us into ministry still has a call on our lives.

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***Editor's note: we are now closing this particular discussion for a while.***

# Reviews

## edited by Michael Peat

### *First Expressions: Innovation and the Mission of God*

by Steve Taylor

London: SCM, 2019

***Reviewer: Bob Allaway***

Taylor defines 'first expressions' as 'initial experiments in ecclesial innovation' (p4). He uses this term to avoid any confusion with 'Fresh Expressions', the official Anglican/ Methodist 'organizational initiative'.

As a newly ordained Baptist minister in New Zealand, Taylor planted such a church, in 1994. In 1999, interest in what others were doing led him to embark on PhD research. Towards the end of this research, in 2001, he visited the UK, to investigate such 'first expressions' here. He was able to revisit the UK in 2013, to see how those 'first expressions' were faring. This book takes its starting point from that 'longitudinal research'. (Taylor is now the principal of a Presbyterian leadership training college!). Of the 10 communities investigated in 2001, only five were still going, and two of these had undergone radical change. (The church he planted in New Zealand had also died, after he left it.) Does this mean that half these communities had 'failed'?

Taylor argues that we too often use a 'commercial' model to assess innovation. We ask how many people have been brought in and whether a church can sustain itself. He points out that what he calls an 'ecological' model is equally valid. This draws comparisons with natural processes (as Jesus did in his parables of the Kingdom). Sometimes, it is good for old growth to die off, that new, more vigorous growth might come through (John 12:24). Although the church he planted had died, three of those who had shared leadership with him were now in ordained ministry, bringing with them their experience of handling innovation. Was it a failure for one 'first expression' to die, to send forth the seeds of multiple new ones?

Leadership is another topic that concerns Taylor. He is scathing of those whose idea of innovative leadership is 'one silver bullet, fired by one golden person (often perceived to be male)' (p130). He outlines 12 'Leadership Strengths' (p110f) found by a church life survey in Australia. Since no one person can be strong in all these areas, 'a plurality of leadership is needed in an innovation' (p111). The flourishing 'first expressions' that he investigated all had such leadership, that often included important female figures. True to this insight, he listens to and quotes from many female theologians.

I note that the 'first expressions' that had survived to his second visit were all based in existing church buildings, however tenuous their links with the host churches.

In a penultimate chapter, Taylor ponders ways that communion could be worked into 'first expressions' with a 'lay' leadership, while respecting host churches who believe 'ordained' ministers are needed to consecrate such. One idea is to work the four eucharistic actions (take, thank, break, give) into other aspects of worship. He also looks at models of good 'governance', and explains how this could have prevented the notorious Nine O'clock Service in Sheffield from ending in scandal.

This book gave me tremendous respect for the spiritual wisdom of Rowan Williams, whom Taylor interviewed (about 'Fresh Expressions') as part of his research.

These are a few of the many useful things I found in this book. You might find others. But to find them, I had, in places, to process dense, academic, theological language, far removed from everyday English. Had I not been writing this review, I might not have persevered.

### *Pilgrims and Priests*

by Stefan Paas

London: SCM, 2019

### *Reviewer: Bob Little*

Written originally in Dutch, this book analyses biblical, historical, sociological, theological and spiritual sources that are relevant to missional identity in the challenging circumstances presented by the secular West. In *Pilgrims and Priests,* Paas who, among other things, is professor of missiology and intercultural theology at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, discusses the purpose of mission in a post-Christian culture.

Admitting church leaders' nostalgia for an idealised Christian past, he argues that Christendom has forged our theologies and mission models. So, Christians may criticise Christendom, yet will revel in dreams of Christendom-inspired 'growth', 'revival' and 'transformation'. Paas argues that, if we aim to (re-)create a Christianised society, we're set for despair but, if Christian mission doesn't depend on a Christianised social order and can adopt a minority witness as its core identity, then these communities can be places of joy and hope.

Our society is no longer 'Christian', yet we're all 'religious' or 'spiritual'—which Paas labels as 'homeopathic folk church theology'. Moreover, outlining the 'countercultural model of church', he says this denies the changed conditions under which the church now operates. Paas also criticises the view of mission as a zero-sum game where the growth of the church correlates with the decline of the world, and *vice versa*. The logic is that the church can grow until the whole world has become church—thus, mission's purpose is to make the world 'church' (again).

Many closely-argued pages later, Paas concludes that small Christian communities in deeply secular societies can find a joyful minority mission by abandoning instrumentalising approaches to mission, reconnecting with the narratives of exile and diaspora (since God is 'in' the secularisation of our cultures) and accepting their role as the priesthood of their nations, cities, neighbourhoods, workplaces and families. This may lead to numerical growth of churches and considerable impact on their societies but, mostly, their presence will be modest, hardly noticeable and always fragile.

Overall, Paas presents a hopeful perspective, rooted in rich theological reflections and a no-nonsense appraisal of reality. He concludes that mission is doxological: it's doing what's good and beautiful in love for a God who loves us freely. It's not, *per se*, about churches' numerical growth.

This book is a thoughtful, key text for academics, practitioners and those concerned about Christianity's future in western society.

### *SCM Study Guide: Church Leadership*

*by Jon Coutts*

*London: SCM, 2019*

### *Reviewer: Ronnie Hall*

This is a study guide on church leadership. It is important to know that leadership is not the same as church governance. All styles of leadership can work in any form of church governance for different seasons of the life of a local church. The starting point is to say that a Christian leader is someone that proclaims 'Jesus is Lord'. This is of course too simple in practice, but as the study guide explores in some depth, there is no one model of church leadership that is truly biblical, since the Bible includes examples of good and bad leadership. For example, we can think of Moses as an outstanding leader—but he shows poor leadership in Numbers 20, which has drastic consequences for him. However, all models are based on the simple assumption that the leader will proclaim that Jesus is Lord.

The guide itself is structured around 12 basic questions of church leadership, with contextual application throughout. Being a study guide, there are helpful study questions. Some of these are more like essay questions, but I am finding an enormous benefit in learning more about my leadership style by going through them carefully.

I highly recommend this study guide to three different groups of people. The first are those in training for any kind of church leadership. I find it hard to believe that this guide has not made its way onto the reading lists at all our colleges, but if it has not, then I have no doubt it soon will. This book is really useful since it helps the reader to work out a base model for church leadership, and unlike other books does not explicitly offer one model of 'true' biblical leadership.

The second group comprises current church leaders looking for a bit of support as they consider changes in their church. The guide will help the leader understand where the church is in terms of its size and style and what kind leadership is most effective for that situation. The guide helped me to understand that while organic growth is natural, not all growth is helpful. Certainly this guide could be a starting point to further discovery.

The third group are those starting the settlement process. Chapter 9 in this guide will be invaluable. We are used, as Baptist ministers, to reading church profiles. But by applying the principles of Chapter 9, it helps the reader straight away to begin to discern if you are the right person for that particular church at this time.

## *Make the Most of Retirement*

by Paul Beasley-Murray

Abingdon: BRF, 2020

### *Reviewer: Michael Bochenski*

This is a really helpful book. All the more so because it is a rare Christian contribution to retirement studies from a UK perspective, rather than a North American one. Undergirding it are face to face interviews, a lengthy questionnaire, and the author's characteristic commitment to theological reflection on personal experience. It is admirably practical, very readable, well researched and, yes, really helpful.

*Make the Most of Retirement* is a book brim full of quotes and references from a range of sources—Paul Tournier, David Adams' wonderful greeting card reflection *The terminus*, C.S. Lewis, Eugene Peterson, David Winter, Henri Nouwen, Sr Margaret Magdalen, and John Bunyan—among many others.

The book is divided into four sections.

1. *Beginning a New Journey* explores issues such as resolving to continue to develop, settling down, maintaining a spiritual and life discipline, and ongoing relationships.

2. *Finding New Purpose* focuses on issues such as our ongoing call to minister, learning to let go of the past, continuing to '...keep our minds fresh with a book always on the go', and supporting our new minister/s as 'angel's advocates'. Paul has little time for a solely functional understanding of ministry: 'Ordination', he affirms,' is for life, so God continues to have a call on my life.'

3. *Living a Full Life* contains pleas to find new ways to relax, exercise, reconnect with some of those we have known over the years, cultivate time with grandchildren (if so blessed), and to share our testimony to God in Christ. This section is infused with something of the personal joy Paul has found, after retirement, from pastoring a local church and discovering instead '...new and changing ways of serving God and others.'

4. *Preparing for the Final Journey* does what it says on the tin! Intimations of mortality—not least in the back, hip or knees(!)—are part of this but so are such things as alerting our

executors in advance to important documents and funeral wishes, confronting past hurts, and looking forward to what lies beyond.

There are no weak sections in the book. Consider, for example, this powerful (Carl Jung) quote on the cruelty of death: 'Death is indeed a piece of brutality. There is no sense in pretending otherwise. It is brutal not only as a physical event but far more so psychically: a human-being is torn away from us, and what remains is the icy stillness of death'. Or this magnificent quote from the Swiss physician and author Paul Tournier (one of the first pastoral theologians I ever read and still one of the best): 'What is important for the aged is not what they are still able to do nor yet what they have accumulated and cannot take with them. It is what they are'.

It was especially good to be reminded of the wonderful Nun's Prayer (Google it!): 'Keep me reasonably sweet; I do not want to be a saint—some of them are hard to live with—but a sour old person is one of the crowning works of the devil.' I agree, however, with Paul's observation on it (note156): 'This prayer, often said to be from the 17th century, is more likely to be a 20th century creation'. It remains of course an excellent tool for trying to live well in old age, whatever its provenance.

Paul's various reflections on past, present and future ministry are also exceptionally helpful, such as this one: 'I dare to believe that my ministry has had eternal consequences. Precisely what those consequences are I do not know...for the most part we have little, if any, knowledge of what has been wrought in other people's lives.' To read someone so clearly continuing to love being a pastor in his seventh decade is so refreshing; it shows: 'The privilege of having been a pastor...is undoubtedly the most wonderful calling in the world'. Paul's awareness of 'the many different patterns of retirement' is also welcome. This is, mercifully, not a one blueprint kind of a book; it is instead a very practical guidelines and options one.

A quote from James Woodward takes us to this book's heart: 'There is a difference between living and being alive. Growing older is about adding life to years rather than just adding life to our years'. Chapter 13 is entitled *Become a Sage*. On the evidence of this fine book, Paul Beasley-Murray is clearly practising what he preaches.

### *Entering New Territory*

by Paul Beasley-Murray

College of Baptist Ministers, 2019

### *Reviewer: Michael Bochenski*

Less helpful, at least to this reviewer, is this study—a kind of research prequel to *Make the Most of Retirement.* The booklet's subtitle tells us much about it: *Why are retired Baptist ministers moving to Anglican churches? What are the underlying theological issues?* The core problem for me, reading through what is basically a reflection on a very small number of questionnaires, was whether the underlying research really could bear the weight of this study's conclusions. Paul is himself very open about this: 'All I can therefore report on with certainty is the viewpoint of twenty retired ministers'. What is incontrovertible is that some retired Baptist ministers have found great joy in worshipping in a local cathedral, or Anglican parish church after retirement, and that Paul and his wife Caroline are among them. There are, of course, good reasons for such enjoyment. The value of the liturgy (for those of us who value still Payne & Winward's fresh take on this), discontent over the banality of some contemporary expressions of Baptist worship, the importance of the Bible being read and read often, and the value of journeying through the Christian year are all among those good reasons. As are geography or (not good) the sense of being made unwelcome in a local Baptist church.

This small study is perhaps best read as an *apologia* for the significant place Anglicanism now plays in Paul's own faith journey as a Baptist minister. In the process of exploring that, he reflects frankly and clearly on some of the theological soul-searching to which this has led him. Among the triggers for this are watching a service of infant baptism, recognising that he will never be allowed to preside at a eucharist, realising that (however respected he undoubtedly is) he remains (by canon law) a 'not properly ordained' minister, and noting that the cult of priestcraft is still alive and kicking long after it should have died!

Paul's critical reflections, however, are not limited to the C of E. For those who know Paul's writings, some familiar themes and bugbears also emerge in his reflections on those 20 questionnaires. These include comments on the numerical decline of the Baptist Union, the downsizing of Baptist House, the financial pendulum swing in favour of Regional Associations and ministry teams, failings in the pastoral care of retired Baptist ministers by regional ministers, the loss of the (paper format) *Baptist Times*, and the (public) absence of an up to date BU Directory.

'The overwhelming impression from the survey', Paul concludes,' is that worshipping in an Anglican Church has opened up 'new vistas' for retired Baptist ministers'. It clearly has, but not without (for some) personal pain, and (of course arguably) significant theological compromise.

## *Faithful Grandparents: Hope and Love Through the Generations*

By Anita Cleverly

BRF, 2019

### *Reviewer: Michael Toogood*

Stop right there! Don't move on to the next book review before reading this. Don't be put off because the book is pocket-size and only 192 pages long. This book is a gem which rejoices in family life and relationships, and is packed with great advice and good reasons for being actively involved in your grandchildren's lives.

*Faithful Grandparents* has a crucial message for every hope-to-be or have-just-become grandparent. Anita Cleverly has 35 years of experience as a church leader, bereavement counsellor and international speaker. She has served churches in Oxford, Paris and a member of a variety of church groupings. Best of all she is a grandmother, who has eight grandchildren, whom she loves dearly.

Anita's own experience of grandparents would make a fascinating book They were typical of their time, geographically and relationally distant and extraordinary characters. Anita suggests that the grandparent-grandchild relationship is second in emotional importance only to the parent-child relationship. The aim of her book is 'to bring hope and encouragement to grandparents that, whatever their unique content, we can enjoy loving and being loved by our grandchildren'.

This book contains many facts, much advice and great wisdom. Apparently there are five types of grandparent: formal, fun seeking, surrogate parent, reservoir of family wisdom and distant figure. Identify yourself before moving on!

There are chapters on fun things to do that build relationships and bonding—from cooking to building camps in the loft and joining the children on the trampoline! Don't worry, the consequent untidiness of the home is soon remedied after the visit! The book includes serious themes as well. The author unwraps a statement of Christian belief, a 12 page exposition of the Bible as an invaluable resource—ideal for dealing with childrens' questions, lessons learned from the lives and experience of our long-past biblical grandparents, and more. The difficult and painful issues of broken marriages, sexual

orientation are not avoided. Many quotations from the real-life experiences of others are also included.

The author concludes with, 'I hope and pray that like a skilled mountaineer, you've found handholds for your ascent as you've read. I leave you with my prayer that your days and months my be bejeweled with these kindnesses of God as you journey on with him, and that you will always hold out hope and love to your children and grandchildren—and maybe great-grandchildren'.

One reviewer says of this book, 'I have loved reading this book. It really is important. I can think of a million people I want to give it to'. I know how she feels—but I suspect I should keep my copy, and use it! With seven grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren (and no grandma to help) I have a lot of ground to recover in the hope of yet fulfilling my God-given roll.

### *Home by Another Route*

by Paul Bradbury

BRF, 2019

### *Reviewer: Bob Little*

Subtitled *Reimagining Today's Church*, this book uses the metaphor of exile to describe the optimum place for the 21st century church in a post-Christendom world. By exploring how exile can encourage our imaginations to rethink and re-equip what church might look like, Bradbury argues that a new narrative can be found by understanding who we were, accepting what we've lost and, through this, discovering who we might be.

A pioneer minister within the church of England leading a missional community in Poole, Bradbury believes that a movement of the Holy Spirit is beginning to renew and reform today's marginalised and 'exiled' church.

Continuing themes from his previous book, *Stepping into Grace*, Bradbury uses Ezekiel's powerful image of dry skeletal human remains coming to life through the miraculous work of God's Spirit to encourage and inspire the contemporary church to seek renewal. Holding up Ezekiel as an example of leadership and pioneer ministry for our times, Bradbury derives insights for a church that has, essentially, been exiled.

Bradbury's argument is that, while the exile was a crisis in the life of God's people, it produced huge theological and practical reimagination which, ultimately, greatly benefitted the nation of Israel. He believes that the exile provides a rich metaphorical story through which we can explore our sense of identity and purpose as the church in post-Christian Britain—emotionally, socially, theologically and ethically.

While many argue that Christendom's longstanding assumptions, order and prestige have gone, it's difficult to say what will emerge in their place. This book uses the story of the exile to question the place and purpose of the church in its current context. In the process it discusses such questions as, what form might the church take for it to be increasingly effective; what leadership does it need; what might mission look like, and how might we faithfully reimagine church for a diversity of contexts in a constantly changing world?

Those seeking to understand and engineer a future expression of a worthwhile, successful and effective church for the post-Christendom era will find many of the relevant issues discussed in this eminently readable book. Indeed, based on lessons from Ezekiel's prophetic understanding, in this challenging yet inspiring short book, Bradbury advocates a Holy Spirit-led framework for just such a church.

***How to read the Bible so that it makes a difference***

by Michael Parsons

BRF, 2020

***Reviewer: Pieter J. Lalleman***

'This is a book about Bible-reading strategies', is the helpful opening sentence of Parsons' book. Part I begins with a theological discussion of what the Bible is, explaining concepts such as revelation and witness. Then it gets more practical, for Part II deals with 'macro-strategies' which help readers to see the big picture of the Bible from different perspectives. Here a linear model, Chris Wright's triangles and 'the Bible as drama' are reviewed.

Part III discusses micro-strategies, which enable us to study individual passages, such as Ignatian reading, Luther's prayerful reading, a strategy that observes the connection between indicatives and imperatives, and identifying topic sentences. Finally, Part IV points to elements of scripture for which we should look out, such as poetic language, rhetorical questions, repetitions and lists. The various chapters of this book can be read independently and in any order.

All discussions are followed by suggestions for what we can do now, how to use the strategy under review, under the heading *See for yourself.* Where Parsons gives a list of passages which can be studied by means of a particular strategy, these lists tend to be short.

He appears to assume that readers already have a good working knowledge of the scriptures: how else could one trace a theme throughout the whole Bible? Another indication of high expectations is the fact that throughout the book Parsons mentions other theologians. These things make the book useful for students and for courses in churches, but less so for the average church member. On the other hand, the author explains the distinction between John and the synoptics (p151), so he apparently has all church members in mind as readers. And indeed the language is simple enough to make this book widely accessible.

In my case the book made me think about how I preach a given Bible passage, because the strategies can also inspire me as a preacher to avoid three-point sermons. I like the author's factual style. This book is not about Mike Parsons and how funny and interesting he can be, but it opens up the Bible for us. It's also a well presented book which would form a nice present for a Christian friend. Warmly recommended.

# Can *you* review?

If you would like to review books for these pages, contact Mike Peat, Book Review Editor, on

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and let him know the subjects that interest you