

Ministry Today UK: A Personal Baptist Reflection

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Reflecting upon the more than two decades that have passed since *Ministry Today* was founded under its original name, *The Richard Baxter Institute for Ministry*, of which I was a founding board member at the invitation of Paul Beasley-Murray, I am astounded at the achievement of continuity of vision for this ecumenical adventure. It is founded, I believe, on twin convictions: first, that Christian ministry, under whatever tradition, has far more in common than those traditional distinctives would suggest, and thus to approach support for such ministry is best achieved ecumenically; and second, that Christian ministry needs a reflective practice journal written by ministers for fellow ministers. I cannot see that those two convictions have lost anything of their power.

Since those days, when I was a young(-ish) minister in his second church, driving over to Chelmsford for our Board meetings that were invariably stimulating, I have served in two trans-local roles: first, as a General Superintendent for the Baptist Union's Central Area, with the role (among others) of *pastor pastorem* to 150 ministers; then, for a decade, as Head of Ministry for the Baptist Union, with oversight of its formational policies, practice guidance, theological reflection and disciplinary procedures for over 2000 ministers. Now I find myself returned once again to a local pastorate (as co-minister of Abingdon Baptist Church) while also holding a number of national roles, mainly in service of Christian (and specifically, for some at least, Baptist) ministry.

Those roles — both as a practitioner of pastoral ministry, and in leadership of three trans-local ministries — have afforded me an insight into the suite of supportive vehicles through which Christian ministry is given depth and held secure. What do I need as a local pastor? Well, the support of my local leadership, the Abingdon Baptist Church diaconate and my fellow minister, Steve Millard, is unstinting. Without that, ministry would be far more challenging than it already is, given the secularised culture in which it is exercised by most of us these days. Then, there is the support of those my denomination appoints to offer *episcopus* —

Regional Ministers and others. They are supplemented by all those informal networks of colleagues with whom one can 'chew the cud' from time to time.

However, what I have found is that finding the support to enable effective ministry is largely a matter of using some intentional channels, some of which I have been instrumental in establishing. These could be categorised as professional, spiritual and theological.

Professional Support

During the mid-2000s, it looked increasingly likely that the specific employment status of ministers would be changed from office-holder to employee, thus increasing the employment rights enjoyed by ministers, but with the high risk that their independence would be severely compromised. It seemed to me that if that change, brought about by successive cases in the courts, was established by precedent or litigation, ministers would find themselves in an increasingly litigious environment. That, and the challenge of providing and ensuring appropriate Continuing Ministerial Development (CMD) — the descriptor by which ministerial Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is known — for all ministers, led me and Paul Beasley-Murray to start the process of forming a new professional body for our own Baptist ministers — *The College of Baptist Ministers*. It did not start well, running into considerable suspicion, and even opposition, from others with a stake in supporting ministry. However, we persevered and find ourselves now attempting to roll-out a programme to enable what our recent denominational review of ministry, *Inspire*, describes as vital for ministry — a supportive structure for CMD. Without those opportunities to keep learning, developing reflective practice, finding support, ensuring collegiality and maintaining an identity that is not utterly subsumed into the practice of ministry, ministers often become dull, tarnished and prone to fossilisation. It was precisely such dangers that were identified at the beginning of *The Richard Baxter Institute for Ministry / Ministry Today UK* and, in order for them to be countered, its main purpose was identified. CMD remains shockingly patchy amongst ministers, and while some are assiduous in seeking to remain sharp and keep on developing, the lack of professionalism among some ministers would be intolerable in any other sphere. If *The College of Baptist Ministers*, which from

its inception developed a close relationship to *Ministry Today*, can continue that work, then something of the vision that gave birth to *Ministry Today* might continue to animate the task of ensuring ministry pursues excellence.

A second strand of professional support comes from individual personal accompaniment. This could be mentoring, coaching or pastoral supervision. For me, it is the latter, and I both receive such support through regular supervision of my practice (which morphs into spiritual direction at times) and the offering of such pastoral supervision to, currently, half a dozen others. There is increasingly much being written about this, and a glance at the APSE (*Association of Pastoral Supervision and Education*) website is a first place to begin, but more so, it is becoming for some traditions — at least in aspiration — the norm for ministry (as for, example, social work, medicine, counselling and psychotherapy.)

Spiritual Support

Ministry Today was not particularly focused upon spiritual support throughout its life, even if it was never in the slightest suspicious of such an enterprise. Many ministers found support in such networks as *Mainstream*, for the more contemporary and charismatic amongst us, or *The Northumbria Community*, for those of a more 'Celtic' bent. In 2009, I was instrumental in founding another body offering spiritual support, drawing on the more Western and Catholic spiritual tradition that ran from the fathers, through Augustine of Hippo, to the mystical and monastic traditions of the West. In essence, a product of 'the new monasticism' this was a new Religious Order for Baptist ministers — *The Order of Baptist Ministry*. Now with over 50 participants and over 30 professed members meeting in a dozen or more cells, it provides a means of spiritual discipline for ministers. We say a Daily Office, which differs each day of the week (unlike the Northumbria Community), and is structured around the liturgical year, and we meet together in cells every four to six weeks for accountability and support, and annually at Convocation, to 'discern the mind of Christ' for the Order. A small core group, in which capacity I continue to serve, offers leadership and oversight to the Order. One recent discoverer of the existence of the Order described it as 'the best kept secret in the Baptist Union', but we have never sought to keep it a secret, while at the same time not publicising it widely either, intent upon organic growth (at the

wise advice of Roy Searle of the Northumbria Community, who has been unfailingly supportive).

The story that acts as a kind of informative myth is that of Homer's *Odyssey*, where Odysseus avoids the Sirens and their luring of ships to the certain destruction of any unwitting sailors, by blocking the ears of his fellow sailors while being himself lashed to the mast of his ship. Ordination to Christian ministry, says Eugene Peterson, is the church's way of lashing us to the mast of our calling, so we do not make shipwreck of our ministry, or even faith, distracted by the current siren voices of managerialism, shallow success or blind pursuit of 'relevance.' At its heart, that being bound to and by our calling is sustained through spiritual disciplines of prayer and Scripture reading. The contemplative prayer traditions which the Order embraces act as a real antidote to the activism of so much contemporary Baptist life, born of such anxiety and panic about our situation in Britain today.

In an address given to the Synod of Bishops in Rome in 2012, and recently published in his book, *Holy Living*, Rowan Williams writes, "contemplation is very far from being just the kind of thing that Christians do: it is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom — freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from these. To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly. It is a deeply revolutionary matter..... We have to be very careful in our evangelisation not simply to persuade people to apply to God and the life of the spirit all the longings for drama, excitement and self-congratulation that we so often indulge in our daily lives."²³²

Ministers can be as prone to such distortions of the life of pursuing God as anyone else — indeed, perhaps more so, as our living depends upon it. We need the necessary correctives to deepen

²³² Rowan Williams, "Contemplation and Mission", in *Holy Living*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017. 93–122. pp. 96–7.

within us the true life of the Spirit, and for me, *The Order for Baptist Ministry* provides the context and community for that.

Theological Support

Alongside practical and spiritual support, there needs to be somewhere some thinking about ministry and investigation of its formation, practice and context. Such a need was confirmed as I and two other Oxford colleagues, recently started *The Oxford Research Network for Ministry*, and found a welcome for that initiative from both denominational figures and academics engaged in research into ministry. One of the convictions I have about the almost 30 years of *Ministry Today's* existence is the contrast between how much has changed, and what has remained constant, in the practice of ministry. The deepening crisis about the existence of the churches, the impact of social media, the loss of status of both Christianity and ministers, and the rise of a new managerial culture applied often unwittingly to the church and its ministry, have all served to change ministry. At the same time, human nature has not changed so much, and pastoral, teaching and missional demands remain at the heart of so much ministry, albeit offered in a rather changed register. Who is researching these things, thinking and writing about them deeply, and imaginatively, amongst Baptists? I am not sure there are sufficient people equipped or prepared to do so. If, for the first time in 500 years, the Church of England has no Bishop who has previously held a University post in theology, the plight of scholarship amongst Baptists has fared no better. At least part of the legacy of *Ministry Today*, concretised in its republishing of every article in its journal in a multi-volume series in 2018, has been ecumenical theological reflection upon ministerial practice, and I wonder what vehicle will replace it (I fear, none will).

I am now in my sixties, and my active ministry has fewer years to run than those that have passed — certainly my stipendiary ministry has only a very few years left. I wish for those who are embarking upon this most extraordinary and wonderful calling of pastoral ministry, and who will have years ahead to explore it, the fruits of the developments in ministerial support that have developed over my life-time: practical support provided by both denominational figures and others, including participation in a professional body and adequate pastoral supervision; spiritual support through whatever means; and proper theological reflection

upon the practice of ministry. Where that was in existence nearer the start of my ministry, *Ministry Today* largely provided it. That its limited provision has been supplemented today by such as *The College of Baptist Ministers*, *The Order for Baptist Ministry* and *The Oxford Research Network for Ministry* does little to diminish all the good things that *Ministry Today* has provided over the years — its journal and its conferences — so congratulations and farewell, *Ministry Today*. You will be missed.

Ministry and hospitality – the example of Mary and Elizabeth in Luke 1

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With good past evangelical pedigree, spending time reflecting on the characters of Mary and Elizabeth in the narratives at the beginning of Luke's gospel was a slightly dodgy business – there was no telling how far up the candle it might lead you. It was probably alright to see Mary as an example of obedience to the call of God (“Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word”) and a paradigm for responding to God's call on our lives, but she was probably best left there. How much I missed (and I suspect many of us missed) by not spending time with her and the rich lessons that she and Elizabeth teach us about both ministry and hospitality.

Most pictures of the Annunciation place Mary in a house which is presumably her home or at least her parents' home. Something that is definitely heretical is my picture of Gabriel as a pre-runner of Christian Aid collectors, going from door to door trying to find someone in and who might be prepared to be the mother of the Son of God. At last, on the verge of giving up, he finds Mary at home. Either he simply ‘appears’ in the living room or has to be let in by Mary. Whichever it is, she makes him hesitantly welcome. What is a young girl to make of a stranger coming into her home – at a time when she seems to be alone in the house? Mary's first risk is to admit him and engage him in conversation. It is her hospitality