

The Reading Habits of British Ministers (with some practical suggestions to encourage ministers to set aside specific time for reading)

Paul Beasley-Murray

As General Editor of *Ministry Today*, I often asked myself, “Are ministers still reading today?” The question arose in part because I found it a struggle to persuade fellow ministers to subscribe to a journal devoted to the practice of ministry. For some, reading a 60-page journal three times a year appeared to be too much.

In March 2017, with the help of two friends, Peter Thomas and Steve Smith, I decided to seek an answer to the question by sending out two surveys, one shorter and one longer, to 1900+ Baptist ministers, and received in reply 309 responses to the shorter survey and 175 to the longer survey. On the basis of that study, I wrote a scholarly article, entitled *Ministers Reading Habits*, published in the *Baptist Quarterly* 49 [1] (January 2018). The full analysis of the surveys together with my reflections are to be found at: www.paulbeasleymurray.com/reading. In this article I want to look at how much ministers read, and offer some practical suggestions to encourage ministers to set aside specific time for reading.

Some ministers read a good deal

In the longer survey, ministers were asked “About how many hours do you spend in an average week reading – including not just print and digital, but also articles, blogs and websites?” The responses were as follows:

- 1-3 hours 12%
- 4-6 hours 19%
- 7-9 hours 23%
- 10-12 hours 20%
- 13-15 hours 12%
- More than 15 hours 15%

The figures may be stated in another way: just over half (54%) of all the ministers in the survey spend fewer than 10 hours a week reading, and almost three-quarters (74%) fewer than 13 hours.

Ministers have to balance their reading

In the same longer survey, ministers were asked: "Approximately what percentage was spent in different areas of reading?"

0-20% 21-40% 41-60% 61-80% 81-100%

Personal Bible reading

64% 30% 3% 2% 1%

Reading for sermon prep

27% 49% 20% 4% --

Other ministry-related reading

51% 33% 14% 2% --

General reading

52% 39% 7% 2% --

Here we see the importance many ministers give to sermon preparation.

Time and other priorities

In the shorter survey, ministers were asked: "What restricts your ministry-related reading?" A variety of reasons were given:

Demands of ministry	46%
Other priorities	25%
Time management	15%
Not a reader	2%
Other	12%

That more than two-thirds of ministers (71%) are restricted from ministry-related reading because of "demands of ministry" and "other priorities" is a significant finding. However, I wonder if the 15% who referred to difficulties of "time management" might have made an even more significant response. Good time management involves setting priorities which, once set, give the minister the freedom to say 'no' to many of the demands made upon them. Eugene Peterson even maintained that ministers can confuse busyness with laziness: "I indolently let other people decide what I will do instead of resolutely deciding myself. I let people who do not understand the work of the pastor write the agenda for my day's work because I am too slipshod to write it myself."²³³ Or,

²³³ Eugene H. Peterson, 'The Unbusy Pastor', *Leadership II* (Summer 1981) 71. See also Paul Beasley-Murray *Living Out the Call* (Feed-a-Read, 2nd edition 2016), section

expressed slightly differently, more ministers would have time to read if they were to distinguish between the ‘important’ and the ‘urgent’.

The response of the 25% who cited “other priorities” for restricting their reading may also be significant. The implication is that there are other tasks which take priority over reading and study – but is that so? Clearly, if someone is dying or has just died, then a minister will want to drop everything and be there. However, I would argue that in the overall pattern of a minister’s life, the spiritual discipline of reading and study is a key priority – in Gordon MacDonald’s phrase, it is “building below the waterline”.²³⁴

Many ministers do not set aside specific time in the week for reading relating to ministry

In the same shorter survey, ministers were asked: “How much time are you able presently to set aside for reading related to your ministry?” (i.e. not general reading such as novels or poetry). The responses were as follows:

- None 2%
- Irregular – as opportunity arises 53%
- One session – about three hours 24%
- Two sessions – about six hours 18%
- One day a month 5%

Here we discover that only 42% of ministers are able to devote specific time to ministry-related reading, and that even then it is no more than six hours a week. I wonder whether this might be linked with the increasing trend for ministers not to have ‘studies’, but to have ‘offices’? This may well be related to the fact that many (most?) ministers today find they are not able to safeguard every

18, of *Book Two: Leading God’s People*

²³⁴ This metaphor is taken from a reflection on the Brooklyn Bridge, which joins Manhattan to Brooklyn. “The Brooklyn Bridge remains a major transportation artery in New York City today because 135 years ago the chief engineer and his construction team did their most patient and daring work where no one could see it: on the foundations of the towers below the water-line. It is one more illustration of an ageless principle in leadership: the work done below the waterline (in a leader’s soul) that determines whether he or she will stand the test of time and challenge...”. See Gordon MacDonald, *Building Below the Waterline* (Hendrickson, Peabody, Massachusetts 2011) 1.

morning for study, but feel they need to relate with people at other morning activities such as a toddler group or a church café.

Most ministers do not avail themselves of a reading week

In the Baptist Union's recommended terms of settlement, in addition to five weeks of holiday, ministers are entitled to a week of study or reading. Bearing in mind that, during the working year, just over half of ministers are unable to set aside specific time for reading relating to study, one might think that most ministers would be keen to take advantage of the yearly reading week. However, this is not the case.

In answer to the question: "Over the last three years or so, how many reading weeks (or equivalent) have you taken?", the responses of the 300 ministers replying to this question in the shorter survey were as follows:

None:	56%
One:	15%
Two:	10%
Three	20%

This decision not to take advantage of a reading week stands in contrast to one of the ordination questions asked of past generations of Baptist ministers: "Do you promise to be faithful in prayer and in the reading and study of the Holy Scriptures, and to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called".²³⁵ In the most recent Baptist manual, *Gathering for Worship: Patterns and Prayers for the Community of Disciples*, that promise is absent in the main ordination promises, although an expanded version appears in the section entitled 'Additional Material: "Will you endeavour to lead a godly life... and will you be diligent in prayer, in reading the Scriptures and in all the studies that will deepen your faith and ministry".²³⁶ If ministers do not feel it important to take an annual reading week, then we might well wonder how seriously ministers feel it is to grow and develop in their thinking and understanding of their calling.

²³⁵ Ernest A. Payne & Stephen F. Winward, *Orders and Prayers for Church Worship: A Manual for Ministers* (The Baptist Union of Great Britain & Ireland, London, 4th edition 1967) 219.

²³⁶ Christopher J. Ellis and Myra Blyth, editors, *Gathering for Worship: Patterns and Prayers for the Community of Disciples* (Canterbury Press, Norwich 2005) 131.

A practical way forward: adopt a strategy for reading

On the whole, ministers will only find time to read if they make time – and that takes effort. Indeed, Martyn Lloyd Jones, the former great Welsh preacher of Westminster Chapel, commented that “one literally has to fight for one’s life in this sense”²³⁷

According to John Stott, the former Rector of All Soul’s, Langham Place, an hour a day is an “absolute minimum for time for study which even the busiest pastors should be able to manage”. He went on: “Many will achieve more. But the minimum would amount to this: every day at least one hour; every week one morning, afternoon or evening; every month a full day; every year a week. Set out like this, it sounds very little, Indeed, it is too little. Yet everybody who tries it is surprised to discover how much reading can be done within such a disciplined framework. It tots up to nearly six hundred hours in the course of a year”.²³⁸

John Piper, for more than 30 years the pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minnesota, suggested that if pastors could not block out an hour, then they could set aside 20 minutes early in the morning, 20 minutes after lunch, and 20 minutes before they went to bed: “Think what you could read! Thirty-six medium-sized books!”²³⁹

In the last 21 years of my ministry, my strategy was a mixture of Stott and Piper. Monday afternoons tended to be devoted to reading commentaries, with more time spent on Tuesday morning when I began the task of writing my sermon. On Wednesdays and Thursdays, I sought to read for at least an hour a day in my church office, but would often squeeze in more time at home before going out in the evening. Fridays afternoons were normally spent reviewing books for *Ministry Today* (a quick reader, I would manage to ‘gut’ around some 180 books a year in that way). The church gave me four weeks a year for ‘wider ministry’, some of which was always devoted to reading and study in preparation for the lectures I was to give or the books I was to write.

²³⁷ Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Preaching and the Preachers* (Hodder & Stoughton, London 1971) 67.

²³⁸ John R.W. Stott, *I Believe in Preaching* (Hodder & Stoughton, London 1982) 204.

²³⁹ John Piper, Brothers, *We Are Not Professionals* (B & H Publishing, Nashville, 2nd edition 2013) 81.

I always enjoyed reading *Ministry Today*. Although not every article ‘hit the spot’, there never was an issue of the journal which did not stimulate. In addition to reading the *Baptist Ministers Journal* (previously *The Fraternal*), I enjoyed *Future First; Providing Facts for Forward Planning*, a newsletter edited by the indefatigable Peter Brierley.

As a long-time member of the ‘Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas’ and of the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research, I received *New Testament Studies* and the *Tyndale Bulletin* – two worthy scholarly journals – which have limited relevance to pastoral ministry. Much more relevant are the 28-page long Grove Booklets of Cambridge. I greatly benefitted from their various series on such subjects as Evangelism, Leadership, Pastoral and Worship matters.

For life beyond the church, I take *The Times* – I read the *Daily Mail* at the dentist’s, and the *Daily Mirror*, *The Sun*, and *The Star* at the car wash! For relaxation, I am an avid reader of ‘thrillers’. On a recent cruise, we took away with us one whole suitcase packed with books!

Reading alone does not make for effective ministry

To those ministers who may well feel that through this study the importance of reading has been over-emphasised, let me say that I fully recognise that there is more to effective ministry than reading. Effective ministry is determined by many factors. For instance, ministers who read for hours a week, but never get out into the wider community, are unlikely to make a significant difference. Likewise, ministers who never miss a reading week, but who are not natural communicators, may not hold a congregation in the same way as some of their more gifted peers. However, there is no doubt that ministers who read are likely to be much more effective than if they had not devoted themselves to the discipline of reading.

Francis Bacon, the English philosopher, famously said that “reading maketh a full man”.²⁴⁰ In turn, I would say that reading makes a ‘complete minister’. Or to quote from one of John Wesley’s letters: “It cannot be that ministers should grow in grace unless

²⁴⁰ Francis Bacon in his essay *Of Studies*.