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the baptist ministers'
journal

April 2011 volume 310

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contacts for the baptist ministers' journal

Editor: Sally Nelson, 4 Station View, Church Fenton, Tadcaster LS24 9QY;
revsal96@aol.com

Book reviews: John Houseago, 47 Filton Ave, Horfield, Bristol BS7 0AQ;
johnhouseago@blueyonder.co.uk

Of interest to you: vacant

Journal distribution: Nigel Howarth, 28 Whitkirk Lane, Leeds LS15 8NR

editorial board

Chair: Sarah Parry, 12 Albion Sq, London E8 4ES (020 7275 7354);
sbparry@btopenworld.com

John Colwell, 6 Elmside, Budleigh Salterton, Devon EX9 6RP

John Houseago, address above

Graham Sparkes, Baptist House

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From the editor

Not drowning, but waving?

I was in the kitchen, listening to a radio programme about Stevie Smith's poem, *Not waving but drowning*. If you don't know this poem, do read it! It is very short, very accessible, and has layers of meaning.

Stevie Smith's father ran away to sea when she was young, and family life was completely disrupted for her mother, her siblings, and herself. Serious childhood illness and later adult depression established sadness as a recurring theme in her poetry.

I learned that the Samaritans use the poem in training, because instinctively we all recognise what it is trying to say: that anyone and everyone can be 'further out than [we] thought'; not waving, but drowning in life. A cry for help may be so subtle that we mistake it, or it may simply arrive too late, when the struggling person is beyond our assistance. The nature of life is such that as we swim happily along we can get into difficulties quite unexpectedly—waving one moment and drowning the next.

We may have people in our care for whom this is true—but it can also happen to us in ministry. The sea that threatens to drown us may be pastoral, political, or (increasingly), financial. For some ministers the recession has meant reduced hours or even being put on notice, not because they are bad ministers, but because our churches have insufficient funds.

Possibly, we may never return to the 'old' ways of doing ministry. Who knows? Meanwhile, the only way out may be to turn things upside down, as Jesus often did. Can we begin, gently, to say: it looks bad but I am *not drowning, but waving?* Is this a time of new opportunities, when a non-hierarchical denomination like ours can flourish by responding and changing quickly?

In this issue we focus on some ministry issues and, in particular, what it might mean to do something 'as well as' ministry (while recalling that we believe we commit our whole lives to the task of ministry at ordination). Please take time to look at the offerings on bivocational and transitional ministry, and if you wish to reply or respond, or offer another view, please contact me. Ministry is for life, not just for Christmas! *SN*

Please see p 36 for details of submission to *bmj*. Thank you.

A ministry to be embraced

by Ted Hale

Forty years ago, if Baptist ministers in pastorate decided to take other paid employment so that they could serve churches without receiving a stipend, they were likely to have been told that they had left their 'qualifying office' and would be removed from the accredited list. Times have changed: but perhaps not enough.

The Ministry Department and other groups are suggesting that bivocational training for Baptist ministers might now be encouraged. The main reason for this interest seems to be that people training for ministry might leave their former forms of employment for three or four years, and then might not be called to a church. In the years spent in training they will have fallen behind, or become deskilled, with regard to their previous work, so a return to secular employment can prove very difficult.

Already many students do in-pastorate, church-based training. Bivocational training is a good step beyond this, and I believe it is to be welcomed, but it needs to be part of a wider rethinking of Baptist ministry. Bivocational ministry opens up new possibilities but also needs a suitable training pattern. There are possible financial advantages for students, although the course of study will inevitably take longer; and the benefits of training as part of a closely knit college community may be lost. As with many things there are pros and cons, but great potential.

I do not know of a single church that would not benefit from the services of a properly trained pastor/preacher/theologian. I know of many churches which do not have one, and over the past 40 years I have watched a succession of these churches close, both in rural and in urban settings. There may be other factors at work underlying closures, such as social trends, changes in demography or lack of vision, but the absence of a 'minister' can be highly significant.

As Norman Jones pointed out years ago (*Ministry Tomorrow*, 1970), as a denomination we cannot afford a full time professional minister for every church. But the reaction to his report and subsequent history has shown that we are unwilling or unable to move to a Methodist circuit-type ministry—or to any other significant sharing of ministers. The one minister:one church model is embedded in our denominational psyche and rituals. The

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confirmation of our calling has been that we are called by, and to, a particular church. Although the local Association and other denominational representatives may be involved in the service, they are not essential. Usually the members of the minister's new church will be asked to stand to identify those to or for whom the new minister will specifically minister. The whole ethos is 'this is OUR new minister'. I see nothing to suggest that as a Union we regard this as an unhealthy practice—but it is. Churches and ministers do well to heed the gospel insight, 'It is only that which we share or give away which God blesses'! That includes the denomination's ministers.

Different models

So I believe our pastors/preachers/theologians should be shared: not just among churches, but with the world which might be called 'non-church'. There are two basic models—or churches can use a combination.

1. *Releasing full time ministers to the community.* The first model is that a church that can pay for a full time minister actively encourages this minister (or ministers), as part of their job, to be substantially involved in life which is not church-related. The old notion, 'We have a wonderful minister; he goes to football matches on his day off', is simply crass. A minister needs in some way to be alongside people where they work, and/or learn, and/or do politics, and/or have their social life, and/or talk about their lives, their problems, their hopes, their doubts, their relationships and their beliefs. That's the world in which the congregation spends 90% of its life—unless, of course, the church has managed to get them to spend all their time focused inwardly on the church and its (or even the minister's) beliefs, activities and social life.

2. *Working outside the church.* The second option is that a minister is paid for a job which is not in or specifically for the church. For some churches this would mean that their programmes shrank dramatically. That would probably be a good thing. The church might even be able to pay for an activity coordinator or social/community worker instead. But the real benefits would be that the minister:

- would not exist in a ghetto;
- would have to talk the language that people outside of church circles speak, and which congregations need to speak if they are to communicate effectively when they are outside church circles;

- would be experiencing what working members of the church experience;
- would learn first-hand what really matters to those who are 'lost' to the church;
- would be treated as a coworker rather than a 'special' person;
- would be able to serve in situations where churches and Home Mission cannot meet the costs of full time paid ministry;
- would have a financial independence which, if used properly, can benefit both church and minister.

The real world

I could continue with more and more benefits from the bivocational ministry pattern. In my first pastorate after training I followed the second pattern; in my second pastorate I followed the first. I found both extremely rewarding, not least in service preparation. I was seldom, if ever, stuck for ideas when attempting to relate the traditional resources of the church (the Bible, prayer, the Lord's Supper, hymns and songs *etc*) to contemporary life. In particular, the exposition of the scriptures, guarded and guided by the use of good commentaries, seldom reproduced what the commentaries had to say, but shared what the scriptures had to say into the world which the congregation and I shared. It is of no use to Mrs Smith to be able to tell the person she will meet at work tomorrow the exact quantities of water in each jar that Jesus turned into fine wine at the wedding of Cana. Who, apart from church people, cares? That's a product of church-focused ministry. It is absolutely vital that Mrs Smith knows that at her office friend's wedding her friend's father's generosity was (as seen in Jesus) a sign of the loving generous spirit of God at work, and that Mrs Smith knows how to share that good news appropriately. That's incarnational, world redeeming ministry.

Bivocational training? Yes, please. AND bivocational—essential for the good of us all.

Ted Hale ministered in two Baptist churches over nearly 40 years. In the first, pastoral ministry was combined with teaching and other work. In the second, retail and hospital chaplaincies, and other community involvement, accompanied his work as minister at The Abbey Centre, Northampton. Ted is now officially retired, but among other things is active in interchurch and interfaith organisations. Contact Ted on tedhale@halesnorthampton.plus.com.

Serving two masters?

by Jason Gain

I currently work part time as a minister of a rural church, and my remaining days are spent as a prison chaplain. ‘Serving two masters’ goes some way towards describing how I feel about working bivocationally. The decision for me to explore prison chaplaincy was not an economic one—I came to it through undertaking a placement in 2009. It was very clear to me and to others that this was a situation in which there was a genuine calling from God.

One thing I would advise anyone thinking about bivocational ministry to do is to contact someone who has already faced the issues involved. I would have benefited immensely by getting an early perspective from someone who had experienced everything this kind of ministry can throw at you. Would it have changed my mind? I doubt it.

Time pressures are demanding in pastoral ministry, even full time. I know this may make a few ministers smile, but according to our Terms of Appointment full time ministry is noted as a 48 h week. This means I have 24 h to seek God for his vision for the church, to care pastorally for its people, to attend the many church meetings, and then to find a slot in which to prepare services. All this takes time, prayer and a lot of energy. Keeping each of these areas fresh, relevant and different is a challenge even without the restrictions of working elsewhere.

Managing expectations

In bivocational ministry the expectations that we put on ourselves as ministers together with the reasonable expectations of the church will create pressures. Managing our time and these expectations is a personal challenge, and one that must be faced as early as possible. There will always be opportunities and ideas that we may want to pursue, but we have to recognise that we just can’t achieve many of these given the choice we have made for bivocational work.

For a prison chaplain these issues are just as pressing. The pastoral work of chaplaincy generates opportunities. Chaplains are able to engage prisoners within a faith context and these encounters challenge both the prisoner and the chaplain. Studying

scripture together, engaging in worship and confronting behaviour don't generate meaningful responses overnight. Relationships, respect and openness cannot be achieved without time being spent with an individual, and that is true in pastorate as well as in the prison situation. So time is probably the greatest of pressures and managing expectations must be tackled head on when working bivocationally.

Nevertheless there are great possibilities and experiences to be had. Being a minister in both environments brings some real benefits. The situations are very different. One open and free, and the other closed and restrictive (I leave you to decide which is which!). We can be tied very much to our own tradition and in a lot of ways this is good. We pass down the expression of our faith and our shared experiences of God from generation to generation. However, when it comes to our collective witness as the church catholic, tradition can prove less productive. In the prison situation there seems to be less that divides when it comes to denomination. There are institutional mechanisms to ascertain a prisoner's faith but generally prisoners just don't care if you, the service, the style of worship or the mode of communion are Baptist, Anglican or XYZ. They care about their interaction with God. They seem far more ready to experience the differences that sometimes divide us.

Scripture also takes on a completely new meaning whenever chains and freedom are mentioned. Those in prison, in a real sense, 'get' what we sometimes miss. We may think it is circumstance driven and in part it is, but those of us on the outside are very easily fooled into thinking we are freer than those on the inside. I guess those imprisoned know what real freedom can feel like. That is a lesson worth learning.

In the end never being able to give 100% to either vocation is a challenge but there are many more opportunities than I have been able to speak of here. Allowing the church to influence what I do as a prison chaplain, and *vice versa*, has so far proved more rewarding than I first thought. The attitudes of either community to each other won't change until there is a real connection between them. That in part is what I am finding out. I know that ultimately my suggestion that I serve two masters is wrong—but when you are unable to engage with every opportunity you get, it just feels like it.

***Jason Gain can be contacted by email at
pastor@chipperfieldbaptistchurch.co.uk.***

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Yes—but what about the music?

by Dan Foster

This question—‘What about the music?’—was in my mind as I first started to sense God tugging me towards pastoral ministry about seven years ago. I had spent quite a few years gigging professionally as a jazz saxophonist in both Christian and secular bands, and I didn’t want to give it up. I felt the music was a ministry in itself—when playing with a Christian band and doing an outreach concert, for example, it was an opportunity to communicate the gospel in a fresh and different way, blessing Christians but also reaching music fans who would be reluctant to come along to a normal Sunday service. When playing in a secular band it was a way to mix with people very much in the world, who had little or no other contact with Christianity, giving me very natural evangelistic opportunities.

Was it a calling?

But was I just being proud and stubborn? I mean, surely I’d had my fun, and now it was time to get more serious! Being a musician is ‘cooler’ than being a pastor—was I prepared to sacrifice that coolness to obey God? And as much as I loved music, surely I loved God more? So was I ready to lay down the music for him?

Well I did lay it down, repeatedly. The problem was that God seemed to keep on giving it back! In the end, after wrestling with these kinds of questions for a while, it occurred to me that maybe God was calling me not to give up the music but to combine the two in a bivocational ministry.

As it happened, there was a little church down the road from us (in Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire) which was looking for a part time minister. So in September 2007, having left our sending church (also in Welwyn Garden City), I began the church-based course at Spurgeon’s College while also ministering part time at Howlands Baptist Church, a small Home Mission church on the outskirts of the ‘less posh’ bit of our town. I was their third successive student pastor; before that they had been led by a lay pastor for 10 years. I instantly felt at home there and so it seemed very natural to remain after my studies were completed.

I am now the ordained pastor of Howlands four days a week (two-thirds stipend). This

arrangement provides the church with a bit of continuity and represents a step up in terms of resources. It may be that as the church grows it can take on a full time minister. My presence provides the church with ministry in the meantime, a stepping-stone to more, if that's how God leads us. I am really enjoying being a small church's pastor, and take a certain delight in giving myself to a church which is neither cool, nor particularly 'significant' in the grand scheme of things (see 1 Corinthians 1:26-29). Had I needed to go full time, staying there would not have been an option.

Drawbacks

There are drawbacks to this kind of bivocational work. Late Saturday night gigs aren't particularly compatible with needing to be on the ball on Sunday morning! When switching from pastor-mode to music-mode and *vice versa*, I don't cease to 'be' the other. It is demanding and can be exhausting. Because of church commitments I have had to turn more gigs down—and when you do that the phone starts ringing less. I have really to guard the time needed to develop my music (practising and promotional work) otherwise, as the reader knows, pastoral ministry has a habit of seeping into every crevice. It already has the lion's share of my working week and four days can easily become more like five.

This is where the music acts as a good buffer. It keeps me sane. There's more to me workwise than being a pastor. The music gives me a strong outside interest, a creative outlet—much like a hobby, except that I get paid for it! I see different people, Christian and non-Christian; I have to deal with the world. I think it makes me a better pastor, enriching my ministry culturally, helping me get some perspective when church feels overwhelming, and helping me to understand a bit of what it's like to work in the world (which it is so easy to forget).

I'm open to being a full time pastor at some point. There is increasingly less work around for musicians, especially in these times of recession. But for the time being I know this is where God wants me, and it's a privilege to serve him in these different ways.

Dan Foster is pastor at Howlands BC and can be contacted by email on dan.howlandsbaptist@virgin.net. Kairos Ensemble is his main Christian band, a jazz quartet of sax, piano/vocals, tuba and drums (see www.kairosensemble.com).

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What was God up to?

by Malcolm Brown

This question—what was God up to?—was in my mind because my wife and I had thought the Lord had made his way very clear, but we were in for a surprise, which I'm very glad about now!

On leaving Saffron Walden we moved to West Yorkshire, where I was to be the minister at Upper Edge Baptist Church, Rastrick (in the Brighouse area—yes, the same town as the Brighouse and Rastrick Brass Band!), and we and the church were quite certain that we would be together to my retirement.

During our fourth year there, it became obvious that the church wouldn't be able to continue to support full time ministry, and we knew that I would either have to go part time at the church, and do something else for the other half of the week, or we would have to move. If so, would it be to another church, or to something different?

I had developed a love for hospice work, having been a volunteer chaplain, in Cambridge, and although I longed to become a full time hospice chaplain, this door didn't open! I certainly tried!

From full time to bivocational...

So what were we to do? Nothing seemed to be clear, and we really wanted to know what God was up to, because things weren't going quite as we had anticipated—not for the first time, I hasten to add!

While I was at Rastrick I had become a volunteer chaplain at Overgate Hospice (at Elland, near Halifax), doing one session a week, and I really looked forward to those visits. I got to know the staff and volunteers quite well, and built up some good relationships, but this didn't bring in any income, and the time for going half time at church was getting closer.

Then we discovered what God was up to! Overgate Hospice advertised for a part time volunteer coordinator, and my wife and I both considered applying for this position. We were told we could both apply, but we said we wouldn't stand against each other. After prayerful consideration, I applied, and I was successful.

As a result I was able to combine my volunteer chaplaincy role, which included staff and volunteer support, alongside actually working in a hospice. What joy! It seemed to be the perfect solution to retirement: half my time at church, and half at Overgate. The benefits were that I wasn't able to take Overgate work home with me, and I couldn't do church work while I was there, so my weeks were divided very satisfactorily between these two roles. The hospice was two and half miles away from home, so by the time I got home I had 'switched off' hospice, and was ready for church, and *vice versa*. I actually earned less than the equivalent Home Mission stipend, but the job satisfaction was huge, plus the fact that the church allowed us to live in the manse under the same arrangement as when I was the full time minister. What a happy way to head to retirement—we thought!

From bivocational to full time...

After about eight months, three different people at Overgate (none of them Christians) pointed me in the direction of a full time hospice chaplaincy position at Kirkwood Hospice, Huddersfield—this job was something that I had longed to do for 15 years, and I had visited and applied to 10 other hospices during that time, but the Lord always said 'No'.

What a surprise, then, when he opened the door—my application being successful! This was very hard for the church. Many people felt guilty for making me go half time, and were now convinced that we were leaving because they couldn't afford to pay us. We have assured them over and over again that we look at it differently. In fact, by going part time, God was making his way clear, and he opened the door for me to be involved in something I had longed to do for many years. I am convinced that the experience I gained, working part time in one hospice, prepared me for working full time in another.

By the way, after I left Overgate, my wife applied for my old job there, and she too was successful in her application!

It's a good job the Lord knows what he's doing, isn't it!

Malcolm Brown can be contacted by email on revmalcolm1@ntlworld.com.

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Transitional ministry

by David Ronco

For the past three years I have been working in NW London as a transitional minister. Before that I had been in pastoral ministry for 37 years, but in the years leading up to retirement I have accepted a new challenge.

The concept of transitional ministry was first promoted 10 years ago by Frank Boyd, then one of the Southern Area regional ministers. Having witnessed many churches struggling to recover from a failure in ministry or a division within the fellowship he undertook a sabbatical survey of how churches in the US were responding to similar crises by providing what they called 'intentional interim ministry'. He recommended that such ministries be established within our Baptist churches and coined what he thought was a more appropriate term, 'transitional ministry'.

Boyd's proposals were picked up the following year by the Moderator Task Group, which recommended to the 2002 March BU Council that the Union develop transitional ministry alongside the traditional role of moderator. Later that year, Michael Boschenski wrote about this to a wider audience through the July edition of the *bmj*. After that the discussion went quiet, and since then the idea seems to have passed by most ministers and churches. In fact I have only discovered one other person being called a transitional minister, and she had thought she was the only one!

A calling to a new form of ministry?

From the beginning this concept resonated with me and I thought that one day this might be a path to take. So, in 2007, when it seemed the right time to conclude a 15 year ministry at Hertford, I offered my services to the National Settlement Team as a possible transitional minister. By staying in our own home in Hertford I could be available to serve any church in reasonable travelling distance within the N London, Central, or Eastern Areas.

I soon discovered that few churches knew—or wanted to know—about transitional ministry, but in January 2008 I began working with Immanuel Baptist Fellowship, a large centrally organised group of four churches located in Willesden Green, Wembley, West Hendon and Edgware. The group had been through a traumatic time of

division within the leadership and fellowship and knew that a time of transition to sort things out was needed. By the summer of 2009 we had worked through a number of issues and had agreed to demerge the churches, releasing each to develop its own mission and ministry. We were able to appoint ministers for two of the churches, but the West Hendon church needed a further period of transition to prepare it for future ministry. Since September 2009 I have been working with this church, and hope to complete the transition in the summer of 2011 with the appointment, God willing, of a longer term minister.

I grew up in NW London in the 1950s and 60s, so it has been an interesting return to my roots. The area and church life have changed dramatically. In particular the multicultural dimension has been a steep yet stimulating learning curve. The past three years have presented a new and fulfilling time of ministry and I want to share lessons learned and encourage other ministers to consider the possibility of transitional ministry. It is still a little understood and used ministry within our churches.

A definition of transitional ministry

The Moderator Task Group in 2002 defined a transitional minister as ‘a suitably qualified person who will take pastoral responsibility for a church for a set and limited period of time in order to prepare it for future ministry and mission’. When asked, my simpler definition has usually been ‘a moderator with more intent and involvement’. It is different from what is sometimes called interim ministry, which can simply be a short term solution, filling the gap. It is also more than moderating, the usual oversight needed by most churches facing a vacancy, although I believe that some moderators actually act like transitional ministers in terms of extra time and involvement. It would help therefore if we learned to recognise moderating and transitional ministry as two distinct but closely related ministries, as the Task Group strongly recommended.

Situations where a church could benefit from more than moderating are those following serious ministerial failure or traumatic division within the fellowship. At such times there is clear need for a healing and renewing period before a church can move on to an effective future ministry.

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Experience shows that many churches either want to brush things aside, or imagine they have dealt with the issues. Such impatience and denial will often mean that the new ministry ends up being short term anyway. Worse still, in some churches it can result in a succession of short term ministries with the underlying issues never being resolved. Transitional ministry makes a statement that things need to be sorted before a church can think long term. Sadly, many churches do not feel they need this kind of ministry. One group of deacons I visited liked what was offered but said, 'It sounds like special measures for a failing school and we're not that bad'!

Another situation Frank Boyd highlights is the circumstances following a very long pastorate, where the church might need to get the previous minister 'out of its system' before it appoints another. The theory sounds right, but my limited experience has been that churches in such situations are impatient to get on with a new ministry. Transitional ministry sounds too much like marking time! Interestingly, my son's Presbyterian church in the US was told by its Regional Minister that it had to have an interim minister for two years after a very long ministry. At the time this felt like an unwanted imposition, but afterwards the church realised the great benefit of that transition time. If only they could, perhaps our Regional Ministers would sometimes like to make such a condition!

General principles

Each church will have particular needs, but some general principles of transitional ministry apply to every situation. They are:

- offering pastoral consistency and stability;
- providing a renewed confidence in pastoral leadership;
- reviewing the church's situation and working through underlying issues;
- discovering a strategy and confidence for future ministry and mission;
- overseeing the settlement process for a longer term ministry.

There were few practical guidelines when I started this ministry, but here are some things I have learned along the way. Whereas a moderator is usually an unpaid position, a transitional minister should be a paid and contracted appointment. It underlines the intent and involvement of this ministry. Another thing I

have discovered by chance is the benefit of a part time appointment. I had actually sought part time as a way of slowing down a bit pre-retirement, after a very busy pastorate, and have worked four days and now three and half days a week. This arrangement has worked well for me and my wife, but unintentionally has also worked well for the churches. It has helped to make a clear statement that I am not their 'permanent' minister, and reinforced the idea of working through a transition. Another chance discovery has been the benefit of living out of the area. I have continued to live in Hertford and commute two days a week and work from home the other two days. This space has given me the freedom to set some im-

portant boundaries as well as freedom for the church not to have to accommodate us in the manse for a short period. Living away has helpfully underlined that I am there temporarily and not available long term—although it has not always been easy balancing the tension of being fully committed to pastoring people while knowing it is only short term.

...a richly
rewarding
and
challenging
time

Could it be you?

Transitional ministry is not for everyone. Some do not have the freedom or circumstances to offer themselves for such relatively short term ministry. Others do not have the gifting or experience. However, I am convinced that there are more ministers who could offer this service. In his report, Frank Boyd specifically recommended that experienced pastors offer a few pre-retirement years for this ministry. I have been moderator on a number of occasions, but these past three years have been a new experience altogether. I have found it a richly rewarding and challenging time and would be glad to share my experience further with anyone who is interested. I hope that the NST will be able to encourage more ministers and churches to consider transitional ministry. Hopefully my journey can raise the profile and help to further this development.

David Ronco is transitional minister for West Hendon BC and can be contacted by email on dcronco@googlemail.com.

Points of view

Today's worship by Michael Ball

I read with interest my old friend Tony Thacker's article responding to Quentin Letts on Graham Kendrick and his influence on Christian worship (*bmj* January 2011). The more important issue seem to me to be not the music, though some of that is pretty appalling, but the words.

Regarding the music, I would like to challenge much of it, not because of its age, syn-copation or style, but because it is bad. I notice that many songs seem to be unfamiliar to our congregation, however often we have sung them before—I imagine I am not the only one who finds them unmemorable. I presume the few teenagers in many churches do not object to them, but they do not represent great numbers from beyond church connections. The younger children rarely seem to attempt to join in these songs, and in larger churches with a worship group the volume is often cranked up so high that it makes little difference whether the congregation sings or not (and looking round, for many, not!).

Not just a modern problem

By considering further the words we sing, the father of English hymnody, Isaac Watts, was understandably appalled by the poor standards of the music in churches in his day. For instance, one metrical psalm that survived into the late 20th century is a dreadful example of convoluted word order and poor poetry (see the repetition on keep and slumber in the first stanza):

*Thy foot He'll not let slide, nor will
He slumber that thee keeps.
Behold, He that keeps Israel,
He slumbers not, nor sleeps.*

*The Lord shall keep thy soul; He shall
Preserve thee from all ill;
Henceforth thy going out and in
God keep for ever will.*

Watts set out to rectify things—not to appeal to highbrows, but to be acceptable to all, as he himself said. To achieve this goal he consciously decided to ‘clip the wings’ of his poetical muse. From the preface to the second edition of his *Hymns* we read: ‘The metaphors are generally sunk to the level of vulgar capacities. I have...endeavoured to make the sense plain and obvious...Some of the beauties of poetry are neglected, and some wilfully defaced...lest a more exalted turn of thought and language should darken or disturb the devotion of weaker souls’.

His best works, such as *When I survey the wondrous cross*, continue to speak to educated and uneducated alike. Unfortunately, the evangelical and charismatic constituency seems to have turned the clock back 400 years. By comparison, today's worship songs are frequently mind-numbingly repetitive, and tend to mix ‘I’ and ‘we’ and ‘me’ and ‘mine’ in a careless way. They frequently do not rhyme, or only rhyme with clichés, while the scansion seems to be totally hit or miss. Sometimes, even the meaning is wrong! ‘Awesome’ actually means ‘awe-inspiring’ or ‘dreadful’, and my wonder is not awesome, despite the words of a popular hymn, although God's creation, which inspires it, is! ‘Awestruck’ is the word intended. To have literate standards in the words we expect people to use is not anti-populist or middle class or Radio 3. Decent literary standards are compatible with simplicity, clarity and popularity, as the Good News Bible translation proved 30 years ago, with short sentences, straightforward syntax, limited vocabulary, avoidance of the passive voice *etc.*

Suspect theology

Not only are the words frequently poetically incompetent, but they are often theologically suspect, or at best, unbelievably narrow. The Kingdom of God seems to be equated with the church or a ticket to heaven for my soul. We are asked to express totally unrealistic commitment (*Here I am, wholly available*—compare Isaac Watts' more humble and realistic *Love so amazing...demands my... all*). In contrast with the Psalms, there is a dearth of content on confession or feelings about God in difficult times. The range of biblical metaphors used of Jesus (high priest, prophet, brother, friend, pioneer, teacher, shepherd) is largely narrowed down to ‘king’ (not the most appealing to the committed republicans among us) and ‘victim’. Similarly, someone seems to have developed a new obsession with the holy war metaphor. The church becomes a mighty army marching on the land waving Jesus or his name like some kind of battle flag—have we learned nothing from the dreadful mistakes of the Crusades? Jesus never called his followers soldiers, or likened them to an army. Even

Paul's Ephesian armour was defensive rather than offensive.

The response we are normally invited to make to God's mighty deeds—whether in creation, providence, salvation or history—is to ‘worship’ or to ‘love’; hardly ever is it to repent, to serve, to offer ourselves as living sacrifices. So the response can be fulfilled within the four walls of the church and the few hours spent there worshipping! There is nothing much about social or political justice. We are virtually silent about the life and teaching of Jesus. As Ben Witherington aptly says in his commentary on Galatians, speaking of the practical advice on Christian living: ‘...Paul does not believe such advice can be followed except by means of the power of the Spirit of Christ and then too he assumes his audience have a rather full mental picture of what following Christ's example must entail. His narrative though-world, and the fact that he lived in a time when there were still many who had a living memory of Jesus, must be recognised’.

How are words interpreted?

How many of today's UK Baptist Christians have this full mental picture, judging by the emphasis on Paul rather than the gospels in the preaching, and the triumphalist praise in the worship? Even Moody and Sankey had songs like *She only touched the hem of his garment* and *There were ninety and nine that safely lay*, for example. I realise of course that such items are past their relevance, but where are their contemporary equivalents? If Charles Wesley could write deep theology that was and is still popular (*Love divine*, and *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* for instance)—originally both for uneducated Cornish tin miners and a different clientèle in the Countess of Huntingdon's Connection—why can't it be done today? Charles Wesley even wrote hymns to help ordinary Methodists in their theological controversies, the following against Calvinism, for instance:

*Sinners abhor the Fiend,
His other Gospel hear,
The God of Truth did not intend
The Thing his Words declare,
He offers Grace to All,
Which most cannot embrace
Mock'd with an ineffectual Call
and insufficient Grace.*

*The righteous God consign'd
Them over to their Doom,
And sent the Saviour of Mankind
To damn them from the Womb;
To damn for falling short
Of what they could not do,
For not believing the Report
Of that which was not true.*

I am not advocating a return to this kind of behaviour, though I do wish I were not presented with the penal substitution/satisfaction theory of the atonement (which I find both offensive and vacuous) by Stuart Townend in one of his popular current hymns. I refuse to sing the line; friends in the church substitute the word 'love' for 'wrath' and sing 'the love of God is satisfied'.

The obsession with recently written items from a very limited theological range of evangelical/charismatic also puts our worship into a straitjacket. We learn nothing from the experience of previous ages and how the Spirit led them and spoke to them; we cocoon ourselves from what God is doing in Celtic, Taizé, Roman Catholic, Orthodox and more liberal church spirituality. We learn nothing from the developing world. Sunday services seem to have been turned into a religious *Top of the pops* session in which novelty is a major criterion for content. I frequently come away from them feeling totally depressed in spirit and alienated.

Thin end of the wedge?

In a book published in 1979, Norman Goldhawk wrote, 'A hymn book may also bestow long life upon second-rate material. Over usage of such hymns, to the exclusion of worthier examples, may almost imperceptibly change for the worse the religious tone of a congregation or even a denomination'. Of course, it is no longer the hymn book which can be blamed for the perpetuation of the second rate and its over use. That responsibility now rests with music groups and worship leaders.

Perhaps I am now a grumpy old man, but I think it has happened to many of the UK Baptists I meet. My evidence is only anecdotal. At a recent 'service' the minister (trained and accredited) said something like 'before the worship group takes over again for three more songs, I am just going to read just a few words from the New Testament'. So far as I understand it, the meaning of the word 'just' in such a context

is semi-apologetic—what we say when we are intruding on someone's time or space or privacy as in 'I'll just put my coat on and then I'll be ready', or 'I'll just take a few details to fill this form in'. The minister is half apologising for intruding the Bible into our singing session, and explaining that it won't take long because he is only reading a few verses. Or if this isn't his meaning, what is? What more can I say?

To make matters worse, the songs that followed seemed to be very randomly selected, and said little or nothing to me spiritually, and even the very repetitive ones were repeated two or three times! Recently I was in conversation with someone who had been a member of one of my previous churches (much more conservative in understanding Christianity than I am). The church this person now attends is facing some serious problems concerning leadership and ministry. But as the person said to me, 'There is still a good crowd coming along on Sundays for their weekly fix'.

Is that what worship has become? Of course it must mean something to us, but should consumer satisfaction in easy soundbite emotion be the major criterion of what happens?

Michael Ball is now retired. He used to be in Baptist ministry. You can contact Michael on mscball@btinternet.com.

We get what we deserve by Geoffrey Griggs

Anthony Thacker (*Points of view*, in *bmj* January 2011) raised a number of points, each of which is worthy of extended discussion. I would like to comment on a couple of them.

First, the remark by Letts that Graham Kendrick is 'the nation's pre-eminent churner out of evangelical bilge' might well satisfy the opinions of the grumpy old man (and woman) element among us—but this assessment of Kendrick, for good or ill, should be seen in the right context.

I, too, find much of Kendrick's output banal. But equally a certain amount of Charles Wesley's output was also pretty awful and was rightfully consigned to the 'unpublished' pile. Likewise I suspect that we can all recall instances of the sentimental, Victorian doggerel that passed for the 19th century hymn and should never have seen the light of day.

History has, in the main, proved to be the final arbiter of hymn quality, and the rubbish element is gradually filtered out. It would be interesting to see just how much of Kendrick's output will still be sung in 2250, once the filtering process has taken its toll.

Assessing the content of hymns

Against that, perhaps we get what we deserve. Something like 95% of any Wesley hymn, line by line, will find a reference or an allusion to the Bible simply because (i) Wesley knew his Bible inside out, and (ii) he saw his hymns as a means of teaching scripture to an untutored congregation that *wanted* to learn. For many, the hymn book was also their textbook. Who today (no cheating) would be able to place, accurately, the reference in Wesley's hymn, 'None is like Jeshuron's God' [sic], for example?

It is therefore possible that our professed hymn writers today—not just Kendrick—have nothing like the knowledge of scripture even to begin to write a hymn with the depth and substance of either a Wesley or a Watts. Moreover, even if they did, would our congregations today be able to make much of it? If this assessment of our congregations is true, then where are we as preachers failing them?

We get, for example, hymns that begin, 'It is good to praise the Lord (*Mission Praise* 2005, number 1074). Well, no argument with that sentiment, I suppose, except that it doesn't really go much further than that. Of more interest is the chorus, which consists of the one word *lai* repeated 35 times the first time around and 69 times the second. If anyone can explain the significance of this drivel I shall be glad to hear from them.

Possibly a greater impediment to the production of hymns of quality is the seemingly unstoppable rise of the worship band, which generally consists of three or four people strumming complex guitars while another bangs away on an enormous drum kit of equal complexity. The band's musical ability might be limited and the medium cannot accommodate anything other than a two or three line lyric, let alone an 87.87.D metre. (Listen to any popular music.) Basically, if the congregation does not already know a particular tune—especially those in the modern idiom—it is unlikely to get much guidance from a worship band.

All of which I suspect will support Anthony Thacker's premise that our worship is being dumbed down. It is. But that is possibly the price we will have to pay to attract a society raised on bite-sized chunks of knowledge and low expectations. A recent (and unexpected) encounter in my own locality produced the response: 'Y'know what, vicar (!), all this religious business does me 'ead in—all that singin' an' stuff'.

What could I say to that?

Geoffrey Griggs is the minister of Ramsden Bellhouse Baptist Church, Essex.

Research project

Baptist Ministers' Fellowship is seeking someone to oversee and analyse a survey of Baptist ministers who, for whatever reason, are single.

If you are interested, please contact

Ron Day (01223 720733)

or

Stephen Copson (01462 442548)

for more details.

Reviews

edited by John Houseago

Lies, sex and politicians

by John Holdsworth

SCM Press, £16.99

ISBN 978-0-334-04340-9

Reviewer: Bob Little

Subtitled *Communicating the Old Testament in contemporary culture*, this book's 192 pages explore how to make the Hebrew Scriptures interesting and relevant to a contemporary audience to whom they are largely unknown.

John Holdsworth, Archdeacon at St David's, Pembrokeshire, and formerly Principal of St Michael's Theological College, Cardiff, believes that theology must return to the centre of church life. This book is his contribution 'towards creative interaction between the community of Christian faith and the wider community.' Eschewing traditional exegesis—finding the truth in the text *via* its linguistic and historical contexts—Holdsworth suggests the critical tools of students of literature, because what matters is the final text

and what it does to the reader.

By using contemporary culture, especially tabloid newspapers and celebrity magazines, as well as other literature, Holdsworth examines how the Old Testament presents the truths it contains, not *via* traditional historical analysis but through the ironies and hidden agendas revealed in its texts. In addition, at the end of each chapter, Holdsworth includes exercises to enable readers to use the Old Testament to illuminate aspects of culture.

Naturally, there are dangers if we fail to distinguish between fact and literary constructs. Nonetheless, impressively, this is both a thought-provoking and an entertaining book. It challenges assumptions and illuminates issues in an enlivening way.

Its principal appeal is to those who feel alienated or bored by the prospect of bible study. To them, it unfolds perspectives and potentially exciting avenues for new, scholarly study. Moreover, it acknowledges that anyone, not merely 'experts', can benefit from these methods. As such, it provides valuable insights into something that is pastorally and practically useful, enabling readers to 'do' Christian theology and ethics and apply it to today's culture.

At heaven's gate: reflections on leading worship

by Richard Giles

Canterbury Press, 2010

ISBN 978-1-848-25046-8

Reviewer: Simon Mattholie

In his introduction, Richard Giles notes that despite glorious exceptions 'the local church resembles more and more a Sunday outing for the over fifties'. Upon reading this, I knew that this would be book earthed in an honest assessment of the here and now, and I was not disappointed. Richard Giles journeys with the reader through the process of leading worship in a local church context. He helpfully reminds us that good worship is a vision caught rather than a theology taught and how good worship is a partnership with God, a joint exercise. I confess to shouting a loud 'amen' to his line, 'boring worship is an affront to God', causing much confusion to those around me as I read.

This book is broken into several parts, the first looking predominantly at the problems in worship today, the second part suggesting some building blocks for good worship, while the third section identifies some characteristics of good worship, before giving a helpful checklist in the fourth part.

Early on in the book Giles identifies indifference or insensitivity to the small things as the source of a problem in worship in the gathered church. While recognising that a skewed altar cloth might be more serious in the Anglican context from which Giles writes, I was challenged to see that a tolerance of bad amplification and general unpreparedness of musicians can, in our own denomination, be equally distracting.

In the second part of the book, Giles spends some time exploring leadership, in particular how the lack of strong, clear leadership can be detrimental to worship. While many might read 'strong leadership' as 'control freak', my thinking was exercised as to how a loving, gentle yet firm and decisive leadership could well be the Achilles heel in many of our worship services. We want to be inclusive, and employ a collaborative ministry, but perhaps we may have lost sight of the need for leadership in so doing. Giles compares the person leading worship to a paramedic at an accident; they know what to do, what they are doing, and they are also able to guide those around them to be truly useful.

The worship checklist that makes up the fourth section is quite practical, and certainly could be adapted for many a

worship group in our own denomination. However, the length of this list could prove a little daunting.

In summary, an easily accessible book that candidly explores the paradoxical nature of worship: how some can be transported to the gates of heaven and others straight out of the church. I would commend this book to your leadership/worship team to read and discuss together.

Holiness and mission: learning from the early church about mission in the city

Morna Hooker & Frances Young

SCM Press, 2010

ISBN 978-0-334-04381-2

Reviewer: Colin Sedgwick

This short book consists of five chapters—two by Prof Hooker (Bible) and two by Prof Young (early church history), plus a jointly written reflective fifth chapter. It began life as the Hugh Price Hughes lectures for 2010, and marks 250 years of Methodist mission in London's West End, particularly at Hinde Street Methodist Church.

Knowing far less about early church history than about the biblical material, I naturally found Young's chapters the

more interesting. But there is much from both authors to stimulate thought and reaction.

Two aspects particularly struck me. On a positive note, I was interested in Young's tackling of the vexed question of the Constantinian revolution. The question is posed as to whether Christianity 'lost its soul' in this process. With frustratingly scholarly reserve Young writes: 'It would be possible to argue [!] that the Church did not look much like a religion before Constantine, but took on the trappings of ancient paganism when it was adopted as the Empire's uniting religion'. She doesn't spell it out, but I'm pretty sure which side Young would come down!

Less positively, I was surprised by the tendency of both writers to play down the importance of preaching and evangelism in the church's spread. A stress is placed upon the compassionate societies the church established ('open and overlapping networks'), thus attracting various strands of society; its reputation for miracles; and for moral purity. But apparently 'Preaching proved not to be the important factor in Christianity's spread'. Mmm...who am I to argue with two professors? But—tell that to the writer of Acts! Is not the model there: the message backed up by the acts, and the acts opening the door for

the message? The message, surely, is paramount, and should be today.

In some ways this book struck me as representing quintessential mid-20th century theological liberalism.

On the plus side this leaning means an admirable determination to get involved with society as a whole on issues of justice, political action and social care. But perhaps on the minus side it means a tendency to fence-sit, to turn the church into the spiritual arm of the welfare state—rather than a bold proclaimer of Christ crucified, risen, ascended and one day coming back.

Church and countryside: insights from rural theology

by Tim Gibson

SCM Press, £19.99

ISBN: 978-0-334-04203-7

Reviewer: Steve Langford

Church and Countryside is an interesting reflection on the places where theology, the church and its community meet. In its basic form this is a primer in rural theology; but what makes this work interesting is that Tim Gibson uses the practice of the eucharist in addition to trinitarian theology as a way of interpreting the relationship

between church and community. Needless to say the language of eucharist and the presumption that it will be practised each Sunday reveals an additional 'Anglican' hermeneutic to Gibson's work. By building on the basis that the eucharist represents a place where we are taught to be friends, and trained out of our selfish ways, Gibson not only explores the relationships between human beings but also the relationship that people have with the rest of creation.

Gibson's work is not new in exploring the interrelationship between human beings in small isolated communities and the challenges that they face. Indeed he quotes extensively from the 1991 Archbishops' report on rural affairs, *Faith in the countryside*. However, a reminder of the issues faced by small rural communities provides an important foundation for Gibson's more creative thinking.

This creativity is highlighted in the chapters *The hope of rural theology* and *Food and farming*. Here Gibson develops the relationship between human beings and the rest of creation, particularly animals. He then outlines, and rebuts, the argument that only a move to vegetarianism can provide the necessary cut in greenhouse gasses needed to rebalance our climate. In-

stead, Gibson argues that small mixed farms provide an ecological balance that has its roots in the intimate friendship expressed within the trinitarian God.

Personally I found the creative way in which Gibson develops the notion of friendship between humans and the rest of creation through a sacramental theology that has a ecological edge very interesting. I also recognise that the sort of connections he makes will not endear Gibson's work to every reader. I enjoyed *Church and countryside* because it is refreshingly different from the other primers on rural theology I have read.

Alive to the Word: a practical theology of preaching for the whole church

by Stephen I. Wright

SCM Press, 2010

ISBN 978-0-334-04201-3

Reviewer: Martin Gillard

It is a good idea for a preacher to read at least one new book on preaching every year to keep his or her preaching fresh and focused—especially true the longer we have been at preaching, since it is so easy to fall into unconsciously unhelpful habits, or grow bor-

ing and stale in our preparation and delivery.

Stephen Wright wants us to be 'alive to the Word' through a mature and reflective approach to our preaching. By using the four stages of practical theology process as a framework, he first reflects on the historical phenomenon and contemporary functions of preaching. Then, by using the secular tools of understanding communication, Wright examines the use of language, and insights from sociology and psychology. Next he examines the theological foundations of preaching. Finally, Wright suggests some practical tasks for the church and the preacher.

Each chapter concludes with reflective questions for the local church and suggestions for further research. I am unsure how effective that double focus is, and I wonder if the book falls between the two stools of seeking to address some of the needs of the local church practice while at the same time satisfying the demands of academic theological reflection.

This book would be a very good primer for someone who wants to do further research into our whole understanding of preaching or 'Christian speech in public on behalf of the church', as Wright defines it. He is clearly widely

read and in has mastered his subject. If you were looking for a practical guide to preaching you will need to look elsewhere. If you want something more general and theological, this is a good place to start.

The future of preaching

Geoffrey Stevenson (editor)

SCM Press, 2010, £16.99

ISBN 978-0-334-04362-1

Reviewer: John Matthews

In his introduction, the editor suggests that the contributors to this volume assert that forward-looking preaching will engage faithfully with the Bible, directly with its listeners, and prophetically with the world. The 14 essays are by writers from various traditions, including three Baptist ministers: Roger Standing, Ian Stackhouse and Richard Littledale, and are grouped under contexts, practices and people.

The first section begins with Standing writing on homiletics in contemporary culture, followed by pieces on preaching in various contexts: Roman Catholic (Duncan MacPherson), Anglican (Roger Spiller), charismatic (Stackhouse), the black church (Ruth Bradshaw).

The second section has essays on the conversation between preaching and theology (Trevor Pitt), the future of the Bible in preaching (Stephen Wright), preaching on the news (Paul Johns), all-age worship (Margaret Withers), the future of language in preaching (Ian Paul), and the sermon form in a digital future (Littledale, whose language assumes preachers are male).

The third section includes pieces on preaching and personality (Leslie Francis), the preacher's inner life (in which Susan Durber argues against this concept), and forming future preachers (the editor). The book concludes with an *Afterword* and an *Appendix*, both by David Schlafer, the latter giving the outline of a preaching workshop, where sermons are offered for mutual critique.

It is not possible to summarise the contributions in the space available, suffice it to say that this is a wide-ranging and worthwhile collection, which covers most of the bases, and which contains much to stimulate thinking about preaching. With any collection of essays, it is likely that every reader will find some more helpful than others. For me, the best of the bunch were those by Standing, Pitt, Wright and Paul.

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this talk will be preceded by a short AGM

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