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# The Baptist Ministers' Journal

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Editor: HAZEL SHERMAN

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the Baptist Ministers' Fellowship.

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

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

# Editorial

One of our church members penned a vivid set of dialogues for the Sundays before Christmas. 'Conversations round the crib' took place between a number of women around their babies' cradles, babies who would grow to become different figures from the Christian story. The sharpest was revealed at the end to be Judas Iscariot. Reminding us that Advent joy does not come to fruition until it has faced its threat.

Norman Kember spoke before his departure from Britain about how he feared his witness for peace may have been 'cheap' - in the sense of not really costing him much apart from a little discomfort. Norman's lifetime work has included persistent and meticulous work for the benefit of cancer sufferers. To the unspoken question of many "But surely this alone would be enough, for goodness' sake?" his action leaves the implied answer - "What is enough? Doesn't seeking God's righteousness entail a cost?"

Gee Verona Walker, speaking in Liverpool after the conviction of two teenagers for the murder of her son Anthony, said "At the point of death Jesus said, 'I forgive them because they don't know what they did'. I've got to forgive them. I still forgive them. My family and I still stand by what we believe: forgiveness."

In London, you may remember that Lambeth Council had a bit of a barny over whether their festive decorations should be called "winter lights", or "Christmas lights". Christmas lights they remained, and Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, was asked to help switch them on. He said that Christmas, for a Christian, tells us why people matter. It is our gift to the world, saying that people matter... "because God took us seriously - seriously enough to get involved with our lives, to suffer with us and change things."

There is a radical thread that links these stories and these people - it is a conviction about God's commitment to the world, in all the intractable evils it bears and in all our pathetic stupidity. A conviction which is given birth in stable and in story, and matures through the refusal to return evil

with evil. A conviction that to live as if God cares is more important than proving that God exists. The former is our business, the latter we can only leave to God himself.

We too quickly leave the theological unpacking of nativity and Magi with the discarded wrappings of Christmas, and in this issue Mark Woods and Katy Ruddle in different ways challenge us to keep journeying with both.

At the time of year when we celebrate the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we look ahead to the working-out of new partnerships and commitment, and are introduced a little more to the Independent Methodists, and the covenant partnership established with the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

The task of recognising who we are and where we have come from, of perceiving the difference between organism and organisation and encouraging the dialogue between structure and spirit, has to be undertaken by any human group which lives and grows. BUGB recently published a pack on 'Membership' in the Joined-up Thinking series. Leading some workshops using the material in this pack prompted Anthony Clarke to put pen to paper to draw out some of the issues which were highlighted there.

In 'Of interest to you' (where, the Editor knows, most readers look first) are included those who have reached what is popularly called 'retirement'. David Baker considers the adjustments he has had to face through this new state over the last couple of years. **dmj**

# 'Another journey of the Magi'

Mark Woods, **Didcot**

'The inhabitants [of Kala Atashparastan, in Persia] declare that in days gone by three kings of this country went to worship a new-born prophet and took with them three offerings - gold, frankincense and myrrh -so as to discover whether this prophet was a god, or an earthly king, or a healer. For they said: 'If he takes gold, he is an earthly king; if frankincense, a god; if myrrh, a healer.' When they had come to the place where the prophet was born, the youngest of the three kings went in all alone to see the child. He found that he was like himself, for he seemed to be of his own age and appearance. And he came out, full of wonder. Then in went the second, who was a man of middle age. And to him also the child seemed, as it had seemed to the other, to be of his own age and appearance. And he came out, quite dumbfounded. Then in went the third, who was of riper years; and to him also it happened as it had to the other two. And he came out deep in thought. When the three kings were all together, each told the others what he had seen. And they were much amazed and resolved that they would all go in together. So in they went, all three together, and came before the child and saw him in his real likeness and of his real age; for he was only thirteen days old. Then they worshipped him and offered him the gold, the frankincense and the myrrh. The child took all three offerings and then gave them a closed casket. And the three kings set out to return to their own country.'

Readers who are curious about the contents of the casket can find out more by reading *The Travels of Marco Polo*, chapter 1, from which this story is taken (Penguin Classics, 1958). The explorer (1254-1324) assures us that he heard it himself when he visited the town, and saw the bodies of the Magi themselves, perfectly preserved. It would be pleasant to think that this were true. In fact it is one of the Holy Land legends which were inserted into the text, probably by Marco Polo's collaborator Rustichello, a writer of courtly romances who heard the traveller's tales and spotted a good thing. But it does, still, give us food for thought, particularly around Epiphany. We may read out of it, I think, at least three meanings which may have significance for Christian discipleship today.

The first is the easiest and most obvious. There is something wrong with an individualist approach to faith, in the sense that it lacks completeness. Our personal preferences, perceptions and predilections

have to be tested against those of others. If we don't enter the presence of Christ together – in worship, in theology, in practical discipleship - we will see him as being like us, with the corollary that we are like him. There is no challenge to change, and our worship becomes quite literally an exercise in self-congratulation. But as Baptist Christians in particular, we submit ourselves to the discipline of congregation, and hold ourselves accountable both for what we believe and how that belief is lived out. Ministers reading this will all be familiar with members of the congregation who insist that God has spoken to them, and to them alone, and that it's the rest of the church that is out of step; this is, for them, a salutary tale.

Moreover, that Baptist tradition has itself to be open to testing, and is held in tension with our awareness that God is present in other Christian traditions, who may have things to say to us that we need to hear. In his 'Free Church, Free State',

Nigel Wright says,

'All forms of church have their strengths and weaknesses with the latter being the shadow side of the former. If the pendulum seems to be swinging globally in the direction of baptist ways of being church...there is that in the catholic, church-type traditions which, suitably re-imagined, needs to correct the inadequacies of the sect-type. This applies not least to the sense of being part of the whole church which can often be a deficiency of the "localist", baptist tendency as also to the need for a stance towards culture, the social order and the state which bears witness to the universal significance of the gospel, albeit in a way which avoids any kind of coercive powers' (ch 2, p 45).

This is precisely if rather densely expressed, and the second half of the sentence would take us off in a different direction. But it does encourage us to take account of the perceptions of the wider church when we are doing our own theology. If we are feeling particularly daring, we may want to admit that others, who are not Christians, have glimpses of Christ, and that to see him whole we need to enter his presence with them. They are, in Richard Rohr's words, 'under the veil' of Christ, whether they admit it or not:

"If you as an individual don't happen to have made a personal decision for Jesus Christ, in my thinking that does not put you outside the veil of Jesus. Jesus is still sweeping up history, and you're caught up in it whether you know it or not."

In any case, one of the meanings of this story is surely that we cannot do faith effectively by ourselves. However, this is an easy and fairly non-controversial reading.

Secondly: there is something worrying

about the notion that a thirteen-day-old baby adequately represents the Christ whom we worship, whose character is a norm for the Church, and whose life and teaching provide a pattern of belief and discipleship.

It is when the Magi go in to see him together that he appears to them in this form. Of course, in the terms of the story, that's his 'real' age; but it's also true that there is a tendency in crowds towards infantilism. Crowds don't do nuances ('Crowds are stupid', someone said). There is an instinct which is probably as basic in us as it is in flocks of geese or shoals of mackerel; many individuals will sometimes act as one being, and these actions are not always good.

Of course there's nothing wrong with a cheerful crowd of football or cricket fans, and we can be sure that St Jude smiles on the annual gathering on Henman Hill at Wimbledon-time. But the 19th-century Swiss historian Jakob Burckhardt wrote of the 'terrible simplifiers', the demagogues and rabble-rousers who would prey on the large, newly-politicized urban populations. It is these simplifiers who were responsible for the last century being the worst in human history; let the Nuremberg rallies stand for them all.

We meet the terrible simplifiers in church as well, though these days their weapons are not the stake and the rack.

Theology is one area which is vulnerable; clear ideas are always attractive (genuinely without taking sides, isn't its simplicity one of the reasons for the popularity of the substitutionary theory of the atonement? It's easy to explain, whatever else may be said of it).

So is mission - in the face of huge challenges, identifying ourselves as alpha males or purpose-driven or willow-

creeking can simplify things considerably, and make the whole thing easier to cope with.

Another is worship. To a degree, this is a function of meeting in a group and sharing in corporate worship. There is an expectation that we will allow ourselves to be subsumed within the group, allowing it to express our desires and commitments, identifying ourselves with the whole. Inevitably, this involves a loss of individuality and a certain amount of bad faith; the minister or worship leader cannot express the totality of each person's faith and experience in a single act of worship. There's a particularly heavy responsibility then laid on the minister or worship leader, even in what may appear to be a theological monoculture, to allow more entry points for a wider range of temperaments and personal beliefs; not, in short, to infantilise the business of worship. It's a question of temperament, of course, but large Christian gatherings - stadium worship - are particularly prone to this sort of over-simplification.

A thirteen-day-old infant is characterless, amoral, selfish, cannot act except through the agency of others, and arouses fierce and unconditional dedication. It is also the focus of an intense projection by its parents of their own hopes and dreams, and it has no way of understanding or contradicting them. There is nothing more simple, and, in all its helplessness, more powerful. There is something rather sweet in imagining the Magi gathered dewy-eyed around a crib - as Hallmark Cards knows very well - but if they go out from the presence of the Christ-child convinced that they have seen him as he is, they may - according to the degree of their native wickedness - go out as very dangerous people indeed, free to enact their own desires with the sanction of God.

Thirdly: there is more matter for reflection in the fact that when the Magi go in to the Christ-child as individuals, they see him as themselves - adults, mature and capable of action. There is a type of spirituality which speaks of the necessity of letting go of our strengths, becoming as little children, learning how to listen and rest in the presence of God. It is not a criticism of this approach (which I am not qualified to make) to say that it isn't the only way of doing spirituality. This story, for instance, might be read as Christ's 'yes' to adulthood, maturity and power. Each of the Magi sees Christ as himself, affirming and hallowing the man he has become.

As I write, Narnia fever has set in; the Peter Jackson film of C S Lewis's 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe' is about to hit the screen. The books are wonderful, but they have been criticised, with some force, by the acclaimed children's writer Philip Pullman for their idealisation of childhood. Lewis's Pevensies, when all allowances have been made for their literary age, are innocent to a degree unimaginable in real children. Susan's apostasy in later books is characterised by her interest in boys and make-up; innocent enough, but still too knowing and worldly for Lewis.

The classical statement of the superior spiritual status of childhood is of course in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve transgress, and are ejected from their primaevial innocence into the harsh world of experience. There is a whole literature, sacred and secular, about humanity's effort to return to Eden.

But - Marco Polo's story might say - innocence is not necessarily a condition to aspire to. It is as they go out into the world that the Magi are effective. Certainly they see Christ as a baby when they see him together, but this is in the context of their

already having seen him as themselves, with the affirmation and hallowing that this might imply.

This perception finds an echo in the last words of Milton's 'Paradise Lost', where the guilty pair leave Paradise, facing life on their own at last. But the mood is not one of fear or regret; rather,

'Some natural tears they dropp'd, but wip'd them soon;

The world was all before them, where to choose  
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide.

They hand in hand, with wand'ring steps and slow,  
Through Eden took their solitary way.'

They are adults, able to grow and learn by experience to avoid the terrible simplicities, and able to seek God together.



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# Motherhood and Ministry: a lived response

In one of our occasional longer articles, **Katy Ruddle**, Folkestone, offers a personal attempt to address theologically some of the questions that are raised by ministry and motherhood.

*"But what will you do about children?"*

Women ought to stay at home, the way they were created indicates this, for they have broad hips and a wide fundament to sit upon, keep house and bear and raise children. (Martin Luther)<sup>1</sup>

It was as recently as the mid 1990's that I was testing my call to ministry. It was politically incorrect of course, but I found myself being asked on several occasions what I would 'do' as a minister if I had children. The implication I inferred from this was that children are a 'problem' for a minister in conflict with his (or her) 'true' vocation; and that in particular as a female they would compete with my vocation. I resisted the temptation to give the question the rude reply it probably deserved and explained that my husband and I had no immediate plans to have children but if we did I would probably do what other working mothers do and that in any case my husband was committed to shared care of any children we might have. I had a nagging feeling however that they didn't quite believe me.

In some ways I recognise now that my answer was naïve. I was not aware, (how could I be?), how much work having a child involves. Nor did I have a clear notion of the costs involved in professional childcare, particularly when the family has only one standard stipend coming in. Nevertheless my husband was as good as his word (as I knew he would be). We have indeed shared the care of our daughter as we job share our pastorates. That, together with occasional help from friends who babysit and from my mother-in-law who pays for a cleaner a few hours a week, *Baptist Ministers' Journal January 2006*

playgroup and nursery, enables us to manage. In all things, the Lord provides.

So much for the practicalities. I can simply say that although it's not perfect and requires a bit of juggling at times, generally I have not found it impossible to combine ministry and motherhood, or rather my two ministries. In fact, by co-incidence I found I was pregnant after only three months in my first pastorate. My daughter was born just over a week before our first anniversary as pastors. The experience of ministry for me has therefore been combined with the experience of pregnancy and mothering. I have grown into the two together. Neither is the experience entirely of conflict. There have been considerable advantages to my ministry and I think also to my daughter as she has a large family at church who love her very much.

## A Mother's Work

As long as the woman lives for birth and children, there is the same difference between her and the male as that between body and soul<sup>2</sup>

Jerome

I can only speculate about the reasons why I was asked about combining parenthood and ministry and why my husband who also went through the ministerial recognition procedures only a little later than I, was not. This is in spite of the fact that there is a great deal more discussion of work-life balance recently in both secular and Christian circles. My speculations have led me to some interesting areas of theological reflection which I feel may be pertinent.



## The Public and the Private

The first and most obvious issue in the evangelical circles in which I chiefly move is the issue of what is perceived to be a woman's role and appropriate sphere. It is assumed that a woman's sphere is the private one of home and family, while a man's is the public world of work, politics etc... In the old cliché - a woman's place is in the home. It will swiftly be recognised that in a rigid form this idea is more than a little old fashioned. Nevertheless, although very few Evangelicals would now frown on a married woman going out to work at all, the idea lingers in the form of assumptions about main areas of responsibility.

C S Lewis, basing his 'theory of headship' almost entirely on the assumption of a 'natural' public/private dichotomy, might be excused for being of his time (1950's):

The relations of the family to the outer world - what might be called its foreign policy - must depend in the last resort upon the man, because he always ought to be, and usually is much more just to the outsiders. A woman is primarily fighting for her own children and husband against the rest of the world.<sup>3</sup>

However, in 1984, Elizabeth Catherwood could still write "Husband, children, home, other people, her own interests; all these are the Christian Woman's life."<sup>4</sup>

Feminist sociological studies into the so called 'second shift' worked by many mothers going home to childcare and homework after paid work suggests that it is not only Christians who make these assumptions about women's roles and responsibilities. With Christians, however, there is a tendency to assume a 'naturalness' or even 'God-giveness' about these roles and to read them back

into scripture. In fact, the particular form of gender role split we are used to (public/private = male breadwinner / female homemaker) belongs to a fairly short period of history within a restricted geographical area and a particular social class within that area. My grandmother, for example, did paid work for much of her life both in and out of home. The same could be said of many of the elderly women I meet now. She was no political radical, just working class. In peasant cultures and craft based economies, while there is a concept of men's and women's work, there may be a considerable sharing of both domestic and bread winning responsibilities.<sup>5</sup> The public/private split may date in the west only from the industrial revolution but it has been built on during the last one hundred and fifty years by a 'romanticization of mothering' and an increased equating of motherhood with domestic work.<sup>6</sup> Certainly it has often been observed that the wife of noble character of Proverbs 31 is a long way from the notion of the 'Angel in the home' promoted by writers like Ruskin. She clearly has a considerable bread winning as well as nurturing and charitable roles.

I strongly suspect the motivation behind the question of my childcare arrangements came from the assumption that ministry belongs in the public arena and is hence male. That assumption could itself be questioned on both practical and sociological grounds.

In the first place most ministers work from home, not from a remote office or factory. When I go 'out' to work it is as often as not into other people's homes, and the most public space in which I regularly work is in many ways an extension of home. At church the family gathers - and the children play together. We often speak of the church as a family. The presence of children, far from being

a distraction from our 'real business' makes the theoretical church family a reality.

Secondly there is a historic tendency coinciding with the notion of a public/private split to allocate religious belief and practice to the private sphere. This is thought partly to explain the greater incidence of church attendance amongst women than amongst men. If God is interested in the whole of life, it is somewhat ironic that women should be excluded from leadership in an area which has been seen as their natural domain. In short, the notion of a dichotomy in public and private life is largely artificial. In any case it is somewhat ironic that 'ministry' should become identified with the public sphere while 'religion' has been allocated to the private sphere. Yet this I believe largely lies behind the assumption that motherhood is an obstacle to ministry.

### **Motherhood and female sexuality**

There may be even more deeply rooted reasons behind this assumption which go back to the early centuries of the church. During that period, the church adopted a dualist tendency from Greek thinking which split the mind and reason from the body and emotions. The male came to be associated with the mind and the female with the body. Judaism, with its belief in resurrection, was not as repelled by the body and the material world as Greek thought, but did make a connection between bodily emissions and ritual uncleanness. In motherhood these two problems are fused. To be a mother, particularly to be pregnant, is to advertise one's sexuality and one's bodily nature. This idea is compounded by the later church's glorification of virginity and complicated by the veneration of the ideal virgin-mother. Thus Moltmann-Wendel argues that women gradually became excluded from the ministry of the early church as a notion of priesthood grows.

...Christian women... because of their bodies which were latently regarded as unclean, were in principle kept at a distance from the sacraments ...<sup>7</sup>

In our society we have largely forgotten these taboos yet because we follow tradition we still live with their consequences. Meanwhile, many ministers who are also mothers are discovering that it is precisely this association of motherhood with body and earth which is adding a positive dimension to their ministry. People see mothers as approachable, realistic and down to earth. So Helen Duckett reflects on her parishioners' reaction to her pregnancy.

The fact that I was a priest and was pregnant was very definitely a good thing; and according to them, the main reason it was a good thing was that in their eyes it made me, their vicar, seem more 'human', more 'accessible', more 'real'.<sup>8</sup>

I would suggest it is possible that a mother may have certain advantages in pastoral work since she has access to the 'private' area of faith and is seen by some people as more accessible and down to earth than a male minister, or even possibly a single woman, who may be seen as remote. Furthermore, the perceived crossing of boundaries which takes place when a mother is ordained proclaims the gospel's ability to resolve the public/private split and 'access all areas'. In the next chapter then, I want to turn back to what the scriptures have to say about motherhood before the advent of some of the dualism described above.

### **What the Bible says about Motherhood - a brief overview**

Amongst the earliest commands to both

men and women in the Bible is that to Noah, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth". (Genesis 9.1) The desire for parenthood seems to be for many men and women quite fundamental - something which is highlighted particularly sharply when conception is not immediately possible. For women in particular, for much of history, motherhood has been seen as the main if not the sole reason for their existence. In any case, the bearing and raising of children is naturally a large part of a mother's physical, mental, emotional and spiritual life.

### **Viewed in negative**

For this reason it is interesting that many of the stories of women in the Bible - particularly the matriarchs of the Old Testament, begin as accounts of childlessness. Barrenness is seen as a great shame to a woman, perhaps as a judgement of God upon her.<sup>9</sup> It is also depicted mainly as a woman's problem. Nevertheless as Tribble observes, "In the Hebrew scriptures the wombs of women belong to God."<sup>10</sup>

It is God alone who opens and closes the womb. It is God who creates life. The womb is the locus of a particular kind of miracle. Notwithstanding advances in modern medicine including fertility treatment, in this area we are particularly exposed to the fact that we are in the hands of God. As Hebblethwaite puts it:

There is truth in the version of the gooseberry bush myth I believed as a child - How do you get a baby?' -You pray for it.- There is a very profound truth about our dependence on God, in this field especially, in which we can be co-operators in God's creating, but not ourselves creators.

The fact of having a baby then, for a Christian, is itself a vocation. Furthermore it is not simply the act of conception which

we have no human control over but birth itself. We forget how in previous generations the act of giving birth was fraught with danger as well as pain. Even with the benefit of modern midwifery there is no stopping the process once it has started. As Jennifer Hall observes

Modern life is about assessing risk and finding ways to avoid problems. But birth brings us to a point where we cannot control the situation any longer.<sup>11</sup>

### **Motherhood and God**

In Isaiah 42.14 God is depicted as a woman in childbirth - at the place of greatest power in bringing forth life and of greatest vulnerability - compelled by the inevitability of her time having come. This reference, though striking, is by no means an isolated case. The scriptures frequently use the metaphors of motherhood to describe God. Some of these are obvious even in translation such as Isaiah 49.15 - "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast?" or, "Both high and low among men find refuge in the shadow of your wings." (Ps 36:7)

Phyllis Tribble reminds us of how the Hebrew language of the Old Testament draws even more heavily on maternal metaphors to speak of God. She cites the word *rahamim* -compassion - an adjective derived from the noun *rehem* - womb - which also relates to the verb *rhm* - to show mercy. Therefore where God is spoken of as merciful or compassionate (which is frequently) the image used is maternal. God's compassion is from the womb - it is like a mother's.<sup>12</sup> Tribble also cites instances of language around midwifery and breastfeeding and a parallelism between, words for beget (male) and give birth (female). We are created in the image of God - male and female -and we are parented by him - father and mother.

Childbirth in the New Testament is not simply a metaphor for the paradox of power and vulnerability at work in the saving acts of God, although it is used that way, for example, in Romans 8.22 and John 16.21, where waiting for the fullness of salvation is likened to being in labour. The New Testament moves in a more nuanced way between the metaphorical and the literal. In the incarnation, God condescends to need the consent and co-operation of a mother. Thus (though his meaning is much disputed) Paul says, "But women will be saved through childbearing" (1 Tim 2.15). The seed of the woman has crushed the serpent's head and brought salvation to us all. God, in incarnation, 'abhors not the virgin's womb' but comes to be born of a human mother and live in a human family.

Yet motherhood is also viewed in the scriptures with some ambivalence. The pain of childbirth is associated with the fall.<sup>13</sup> The processes of birth are also associated with taboos about ritual purity (for example Leviticus 12.1-5). St Paul sees the responsibilities of husband and family as creating a conflict of interest for a Christian woman's ministry.<sup>14</sup> Jesus himself challenges the dominance of family in the affections of his disciples.<sup>15</sup> Motherhood is revitalised by the call to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut 6.4).

I find the reference in Luke 11 particularly interesting. A note in the Women's Study New Testament puts it thus: "Jesus wanted this woman to know that the response made to God's Word is more important than any identity as mother." To be a Christian precedes the calling to be a mother as it does the calling to be a minister. Yet it is in working out one's callings that the Christian life is lived.

## Motherhood as a Paradigm for ministry

"An ounce of mother is worth a pound of clergy." (Spanish Proverb)<sup>16</sup>

There is a long tradition of the use of 'Fatherhood' as a metaphor for ministry, particularly in the Catholic and Orthodox sections of the church. It is expressed in this way in the old 'High Church' (pre Oxford Movement) writings of George Herbert:

The country parson is not only a father to his flock, but also professeth himself thoroughly of the opinion, carrying it about with him as fully as if he had begot his whole parish.<sup>17</sup>

Probably mindful of Jesus' injunction against calling anyone here on earth 'father'<sup>18</sup> the language is used more cautiously in the evangelical wing of the church. Nevertheless the concept is still current amongst Protestants and Pentecostals, probably deriving from St Paul's quasi parental relationship with his 'son' Timothy.

It might be thought then, that the concept of ministry as motherhood is simply a feminisation of 'fatherhood'- something that was bound to happen with the revival of women's ministry in the church. However most women ministers would reject the title 'Mother' with a vigour which suggests the correlation is not direct. While obviously not unrelated, I would argue that motherhood and fatherhood metaphors for ministry derive from separate streams. The use of maternal images for ministry is traceable to Jesus himself: - "I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings." (Luke 13.34)

Perhaps even more strikingly Paul describes himself as a pastor in terms of

giving birth over and over again: - "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you." (Gal 4.19)

Daringly he sees himself as both mother to his charges and to the Christ he longs to see formed in them. It has been pointed out that this is biologically impossible but that does not affect the strength of his metaphor. Similarly Paul speaks of himself in the nurturing role of a mother - "We were gentle among you, like a mother coming for her little children" (1 Thess 2.17) and "I gave you milk, not solid food." (1 Cor 3.2)

Other New Testament writers also see the believers they have a personal relationship with as babies, requiring milk, or alternatively allowing themselves to be weaned onto stronger food.<sup>19</sup> It is therefore perfectly possible for both male and female ministers to see themselves in maternal terms. However, it is certainly because I am a mother that I find these images both resonant and challenging.

On an emotional level the act of giving birth is a maelstrom of conflicting feelings. There is pain and fear - both for oneself and the child and the sheer backbreakingly hard work. There is also a sense of solitude. Though others are there to help; the father, the midwives, this is something no-one else can do for you. There is also an inevitability about it - there is at this point no turning back and no way forward but through it. This is both a frightening and releasing thought since there is no other choice but to release control to God. It is also an exhilarating experience. There is the joy of welcoming the child but also an overwhelming sense of empowerment - of being a participant in a miracle. The morning my daughter was born I felt able to tackle the problems of the world!

It would be impossible to live life at such a pitch of emotional intensity. There are, however certain similarities to ministry which St Paul has imaginatively entered into in his use of the birth metaphor. Undoubtedly there are times when ministry is a struggle and surrounded with pain and anxiety. It can also be a very lonely position and ultimately feel very vulnerable. It is also something from which, once one accepts the call, there is no escaping except by some terrible bereavement. Even without a sacramental view of ordination, Messer cites Urban T Holmes:

Indelibility of priestly character is found in the internal call ... once the priestly image has fallen upon an individual it 'haunts' him. As for the 'whiskey priest' in Graham Greene's "The Power and the Glory" ... the priesthood is like the stigmata in the hands and feet of the risen Christ. They remain despite all.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, the obverse of the coin of pain and fear is hope and joy. The life of a minister, like that of a mother, sees both sides of the coin. I am filled with hope that we will see the Kingdom coming, that there will be growth and answered prayer. There are also moments of pure joy - to say the words of baptism or marriage, to see someone respond to God through a sermon, or to listen to their testimony. Then there are times when the sense of pain and of privilege are very closely mixed. For instance, when I pray with a family who have been bereaved and the act of gentle prayer unlocks their tears. Or when I preside at communion and speak words of both brokenness and healing. Anne Townsend speaks of this in quite startling terms, describing the first Eucharist she presided at

I felt as if I were holding a newborn grandchild and his fragile body was broken, crushed by the weight of the

world. Simultaneously, I merged with all those mothers whose adult sons (human and divine) had died for others.<sup>21</sup>

Above all, when it comes to joy, nothing compares to being present at the moment when someone prays to receive Christ - then I feel, if not like a mother, at least like a midwife.

### **Professionalism versus Compassion**

There are still other ways in which the roles of mother and minister resemble each other. One is the way that both resist professionalization. In a very real sense both must be done 'for love'. I do not mean that in a sentimental sense, still less that we can live on thin air. I think, rather, that you cannot think of either motherhood or ministry as simply a career. Both resist being pushed into the nine to five mould and both depend (far more than a job does) on the motivation of the practitioner. Both roles are more about being than doing. Of course, within them there are tasks which must be done whether or not one is feeling loving. Tonight's tea and Sunday's sermon must be prepared. However, love can transform the task of changing a stinking nappy and love (or at least empathy, compassion even) can take a sermon under the listener's skin.

Not all the points of resemblance between motherhood and ministry are positive ones. One common area of difficulty is that of guilt. It is said of motherhood that the guilt is delivered with the placenta. In both cases the guilt is ultimately linked with the love. The task is so huge, and matters so much, that no matter how hard one works, how many hours are put in, it is never enough. Added to that is the feeling of being somehow responsible for and yet unable to control the outcomes. At the end of the day children and church members have to

make their own decisions - which may not be as the minister / mother would wish or advise. At times both mothers and minister have to actively love people whom they may not very much like. Where ministry is concerned there is the added complication that the love has to be consciously remembered. At least usually a mother has a little help from biology bonding with her baby. That is not the same with ministry. Furthermore, George Herbert's exhortation to see the entire parish as your children is literally impossible to follow.

When one is trying to operate simultaneously in two guilt inducing roles the problem is greatly compounded. The only solution for guilt is to bring it to the cross the place of forgiveness for my real shortcomings both as a mother and a minister. The cross, is also the place of vulnerability and loss of control where Christ labours to bring forth new life and where with him we commit our spirits into the Father's hands. All that can be done, in the end, is to respond to God's call and leave the outcomes to him.

### **Conclusion**

There remain a great many 'unbegged questions': for example, whether there is a qualitative difference between fathering and mothering and the issue of problems raised by parenthood metaphors for ministry. However, this is mainly a reflection on my own two vocations. In fact, it is the concept of vocation which I find most helpful. I might a few years ago have described myself as 'part-time'. However, somewhere I came across the expression bi-vocational, a term which expresses quite well how I see myself: a person with two equally urgent callings. It is clearly a nonsense to talk about part-time motherhood and I believe equally nonsensical to speak of part time ministry. Both vocations are ontological nature, a call to being before ever a call to doing.

There is evidently a paradox here. If both callings carry the divine mandate surely there is an absoluteness about the demands which must inevitably bring the two into conflict. We have it on very good authority that 'no-one can serve two masters'. The answer then is 'don't'. The stress with vocation is not on the vocation itself but on who is doing the calling. Motherhood and the ministry of word and sacrament are both high callings but they are not *per se* absolute. The only absolute calling for a Christian is the one which says 'follow me.' It is even possible that in doing that both vocations can add something to each other. As Gulnar Francis-Dequam, who is a mother and an Anglican minister, puts it:

Both Motherhood and Priesthood are about more than doing a particular job in a given time, before clocking off. They are for me about learning to 'be'. Existing before God by striving to fulfil my potential in any given situation and allowing myself to give of my best. Permitting the different elements of the two vocations to co-exist - to merge and feed each other.<sup>22</sup> **bmj**

<sup>1</sup> O' Faolain, Julia & Martines, Lauro, "Not in God's Image", Fontana/Collins, 1974 p 209

<sup>2</sup> Jerome, cited by Elisabeth Moltmann Wendel ("I am my body" SCM 1994, p 43)

<sup>3</sup> Van Leuwen, Mary Stewart (ed), "After Eden", Eerdmans, 1993 p 389

<sup>4</sup> in Lees, Shirley (ed), "The Role of Women : When Christians disagree", IVP, 1984 p 42.

<sup>5</sup> see Keay, Kathy (ed), "Men, Women and God", Marshall Pickering. 1987 pp 207-208

<sup>6</sup> see Van Leuwen, 1993, pp 505-514

<sup>7</sup> Moltmann-Wendel, 1994, p 39

<sup>8</sup> in Rees, Christina (ed), "Voices of this calling", Canterbury Press, 2002 p 119

<sup>9</sup> 2 Samuel 6.23

<sup>10</sup> Tribble, Phyllis, "God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality", SGM, 1978 p34

<sup>11</sup> Jennifer Hall, *Blood and Straw*. 'Third Way', December 2002

<sup>12</sup> see Tribble, 1978 pp 13-39

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 3:16

<sup>14</sup> 1 Corinthians 7

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 12:50, Luke 11-.27-28; 14:26

<sup>16</sup> Source : Hodder book of Christian Quotations - Hodder & Stoughton : 1982, page 168

<sup>17</sup> Martz, Louis (ed), "George Herbert and Henry Vaughan", OUP, 1986 p 211

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 23:9

<sup>19</sup> Hebrews 5:12; 1 Peter 2:2

<sup>20</sup> Messer, Donald E., "Contemporary Images of Christian Ministry", Abingdon, 1989 p 71

<sup>21</sup> in Rees (ed) 2002 p 65

<sup>22</sup> in Rees (ed.) 2002

To demand that others should provide you with textbook answers is like asking a strange woman to give birth to your baby. There are insights that can be born only of your own pain, and they are the most precious."

Janusz Korczak

Source: Daily Dig <http://dailydig.bruderhof.org/>

# Membership Matters: From a Barrier to a Threshold

Anthony J Clarke, Oxford

At the Baptist Assembly 2004, the BUGB launched a new pack on Membership, the first of a new initiative on 'Joined-up Thinking'. Since then there have been two one day seminars based upon the packs, which, it has been recognised, have raised as many questions as answers. Church Membership is a complex issue, both theologically and culturally, which touches on our fundamental understanding of the nature of church and the nature of our present society and one that is becoming increasingly prominent.<sup>1</sup> If we are to continue to affirm that membership matters, it is necessary to rethink its purpose and its theological foundations.

## In and Out

Membership is fundamentally a boundary, and one which has historically been connected to baptism. Membership, at its best, is therefore a Gospel boundary. The very proper stress on open membership within our current ecumenical setting has reduced the unambiguous connection between baptism and membership, but the majority of churches within our Union would still expect membership to be part of the process of believer's baptism. Whereas there is good reason to include in our churches members who have not been baptised as believers, there is certainly a strong theological argument that there is no place for baptism without the candidates thereby becoming members of the local church.

Historically, membership has been a boundary which has stressed both inclusion and exclusion. Membership is a positive expression of covenant relationships. Those who join the local church as members are making the commitment to live in covenant relationship with the other members, and in so doing are both expressing and entering into the covenant between God and the Church in Jesus Christ. Membership is therefore a positive choice that expresses the response of the individual to the covenant invitation of

God in Christ. There is much theological depth in this understanding, which links membership of the local church closely with membership of the body of Christ, and provides the strongest biblical basis for our approach to membership.

But membership has also been a boundary that has expressed some sense of exclusion, for those who are not 'in' are 'out'. There may be a greater desire today to cut through this stark contrast and speak instead of those who are 'in' and those who are 'not yet in' and this takes us to the very heart of our understanding of the church and her relationship to the wider world. One of the concerns of early Baptists was to maintain the purity of the gathered church, seen most clearly in their practice around the Lord's Table. The Particular Baptist Confession of 1644 forcefully limits access to the table to those who are baptised as believers, which meant members of that church or another Baptist church.

'Though a believer's right to use the Lord's Supper do immediately flow from Jesus Christ, apprehended and received by faith, yet in as much as all things ought to be done not only decently but also in order... accordingly the Apostles first baptised disciples and then admitted them to the use of the Lord's Super... We therefore



do not admit any to the use of the Supper, nor communicate with any in the use of this ordinance, but disciples baptised, lest we should have fellowship with them in their doing contrary to order.’<sup>2</sup>

In this way the boundary of membership also acts as a barrier that clearly demarcates those who belong and those on the outside. Such an understanding is intensified within a strong Calvinistic theology, in which the barrier of church membership may reflect at least the principle of the barrier of predestination.

Over the last four centuries of Baptist life there have been numerous developments in our understanding of membership, often connected to changes within the cultural context. The Act of Toleration of 1689 began the process that led to Baptist churches no longer being persecuted, to becoming socially acceptable and then to the full part Baptists now play in the wider church and society. With these changes came the development of a new self-understanding. The rise of secular voluntary societies in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries offered a new cultural model for church life, and the late 20<sup>th</sup> century stress on rights and responsibilities offered new language to express a sense of belonging. Such changes portray a clear development from the 17<sup>th</sup> century understanding of membership in terms of inclusion and exclusion.

Although there has been an attempt to rediscover the language of covenant in recent years, much of the positive understanding of this aspect of membership seems to have been lost. The understanding of church meetings as a place for everyone ‘to have their say’ often seems a more dominant understanding of membership. This is not to say that there is no longer a depth of committed relationships within any particular

congregation, but this sense of covenant commitment is no longer associated with membership. Equally, while it is no longer seen as a marker of a pure(r) or true(r) church, the concept of membership is still experienced by some as a negative barrier. The reasons for this may be various and certainly includes the moving of individuals from denominations that have not been structured around a membership concept.

### **Barriers and Thresholds**

Although it may well be too strong to describe this as a ‘crisis’, the increase in the number of people who wish to be active within a congregation but not become members, together with an understanding of membership that has become more functional than relational, suggests that we have reached a point when we need to rethink the concept of membership. One way of doing this may be to seek to complete the move from understanding the boundary of membership less as a barrier and more as a threshold.

The image of ‘threshold’ suggests an open door, which leads into something new and even exciting. Thus, while recognising that there is still a boundary here – not all will choose to go through the open door – the emphasis is very much on the positive, and this gives us an opportunity to rediscover some of our historical understanding of covenant. The open vista to which the threshold leads is that of life in covenant together. Those who become members of a local church are entering into a deep and life-giving network of relationships in which love, care and support are given and received and in which a mutual accountability is found. It was such a vision of the church that inspired the very first English Baptists.<sup>3</sup> Such an understanding of membership certainly puts a great stress on the local church. If those who join a church either through baptism or through transfer are to find membership to be a threshold, then

there really must be a quality of relationships that is attractive and life-giving. The fact that this is not always the case may be another factor in the decline of those wish to share in membership.

Such an understanding of membership, rather than being inward-looking, also has a very clear mission dimension. It suggests that at the heart of church life are covenant relationships, which themselves express and are intertwined within the covenant relationships of God, in which individuals can find identity, support and accountability. With all the recent evidence indicating the importance of 'belonging' in the process of coming to faith, then such covenant relationships are essential for a church that is to successfully engage in mission. It can offer a vision of life in its fullness that can be seen and experienced by others. For those who come to faith in such a church, baptism and membership is not an occasion when relationships are begun with the congregation but where, amongst other things, the person baptised expresses their commitment to play their full part within this covenant community. Such a person will already have had a sense of belonging and a sense which would have steadily grown within wider relationships in the church.

### **Visiting and Voting**

What then would be required for a local church to transform membership from a barrier into a threshold? The principle need is for the church to be based on deep and significant covenant relationships. If membership is to be a threshold, an open door into something new, then the reality to which it points must be genuine and attractive. One of the possible reasons why membership of churches has declined, even when congregations have increased, is that the experience of being a church member has been difficult and painful. The deep-rooted care and commitment, which

are the hallmarks of covenant, have been lacking, replaced by a narrow focus on petty concerns. It is the church that draws on the theological depth of sharing in the Trinitarian covenant of love and makes this real in its human relationships that will be in a position to transform both the understanding and experience of membership.

Building, then, on this foundation a church may then explore the practical ways that membership is entered into and expressed. The traditional pattern is for the church meeting, or the deacons, to appoint visitors, who meet with those who have expressed a desire to become members and then report back to a church meeting, at which there may be discussion, sometimes explaining who these prospective members are to those who look blank when their names are mentioned, and then a vote. However, both the visiting and the voting may need to be rethought. In a small or medium sized church, built on covenant relationships, the visiting of prospective members, often initially understood as some kind of test by those being visited, should simply be unnecessary. Whether individuals have come to faith in that church or have moved from another church, they will already have been welcomed into the fellowship of the church. Relationships will have begun on Sundays, particularly over tea and coffee; invitations will have been offered for coffee or a meal at various homes or to join some social outing; conversations will have naturally turned to discuss issues of spiritual experience; needs will have been shared and prayers offered. When such individuals express the desire to join the church they will already be known to the congregation. If there is a need to appoint visitors it suggests that the relationships have not worked. There may well be a need for someone, or a couple or a small group, to discuss how that local church

understands membership and the commitment that new members will be making, based, of course, on the understanding that membership is an open door to a rich experience of God. But this is quite different from what normally happens when prospective members are 'visited'. Larger churches may need some co-ordination to help relationships develop and ensure that no-one is overlooked, but the same principles apply.

If a local church meeting were then to vote on accepting new members, it could do so out of a real sense of knowledge and commitment. But is there also space for rethinking the concept of voting? One possibility is that a traditional vote is replaced by a more general acclamation. The news is shared that a particular individual would like to become a member, to which the gathered members reply with a hearty 'amen'. This, in my experience, is what voting can become. But the practice of voting raises the particular question, on what grounds a church meeting might say 'no' to a request for membership. The assumption, of course, is that membership is understood and taught to be a significant commitment to live in covenant relationships with God and with fellow church-members. The historical origins of Baptist church membership developed, of course, at a time when dissenting congregations were establishing their identity in distinction to the established church. Within this social context developed a theology of the church as 'gathered' by God, in which the true church comprised those who had personal faith in Jesus Christ, which was witnessed in believer's baptism. A number of specific reasons may then be given to reject prospective members of the church.

Fundamental to the early Baptists was whether or not prospective members were 'true saints', that is had faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. We too will want to

ensure that those who become members are true believers. But it is doubtful whether a process of voting is a way to achieve this. If, for example, membership is based around a covenant, which sets out the relationship we have with God and with each other, and the basis of church membership is to agree to, perhaps sign, this covenant, then those who become members are thereby declaring their faith. Is not such a personal declaration sufficient? Connected with being a 'true saint' was being baptised as a believer, and for the early Baptists this was a non-negotiable requirement. The context of our church life today is somewhat different, although individual churches are bound by their particular trust deeds. It is certainly possible to have a constitution that advocates believer's baptism but allows for those baptised in other traditions, so that baptism in some tradition is a requirement for membership.

A third issue is then the question of life-style, which perhaps touches on the issue of membership most acutely today. It is quite possible to establish a constitution that sets baptism, within some tradition, and agreement to the church covenant as the requirements for church membership. Prospective members are then able to opt in on these clear bases. But should the church be able to decline membership to those who are baptised, who agree to the covenant but who live a life-style which that local church does not accept? Not only do such issues require much sensitivity, and are rarely handled well in the context of a church meeting, but they also ask significant theological questions. Recognising the ministry of Jesus to include those who were excluded because of their life-style and recognising our own failures and ingrained habits, what should the requirement be for those who seek to become and who wish to remain church members?

# THE BAPTIST INSURANCE COMPANY PLC.

Beaufort House, Brunswick Road, Gloucester, GL1 1JZ

Tel: 0845 0702223

## IT'S A CHILL WIND THAT BLOWS.....

As I began to put pen to paper for this article those prophets of doom, the weather men, were predicting all sorts of bad weather to come this winter. Well, we have already had the first snowfalls which have thrown the country into chaos so who will deny that they could be right?

They constantly refer to the winter of 1963 which I remember well. This was the year when for two months temperatures did not exceed freezing. Everything was frozen and warmth hard to find.

On Sundays I was eager to get to church as I found it a regular source of warmth. No it was not the welcome of the minister or congregation - it took the form of a large old cast iron radiator which along with several others radiated huge amounts of heat into the spacious church building.

At the time the heating could only be fired up for the weekends and during the week it was left turned off to contain costs. It had been OK for years and on the basis that "if it ain't broke don't fix it" was clearly left to its own devices.

Well as you will have guessed the inevitable happened and one of the pipes froze – somehow a "A Chill Wind" had blown and done its worst. To cap it all it must have been a day or two before it was realised that not only did we have no heat in the radiators we had water seemingly coming from everywhere!! What followed was several weeks when the only heat we had was from some pretty ineffective electric heaters. That chill wind had certainly not done us any good!

Although our winters seem to have become milder since 1963 I can guarantee that at the first sharp spell of freezing temperatures there will be both churches and homes that will suffer damage. Although insurance will cover repairs the inconvenience suffered is much greater than that caused by a few simple precautions.

I would therefore urge that:

- Someone carries out regular checks, particularly during cold weather, if the property is empty even for a short period. Church hall toilets can be made most inconvenient!! Although this may not stop burst pipes, it does mean that problems will be discovered quicker, keeping damage to a minimum.
- Those checking the premises know how to find and shut the stop valve.
- A keyholder is available at all times especially during holiday periods.
- Pipes and water tanks should be lagged, but tanks should not be lagged underneath so as to allow warm air from below to prevent them from freezing.
- Warmth is the best protection against frost damage so if possible arrange for some form of heating to be maintained.

May your church's winter season remain dry, warm and comfortable.

Yours Sincerely

Alf Green ACII

ASSISTANT GENERAL MANAGER

One of the legal requirements for churches to be registered as a charity is for there to be provision for the admission and termination of membership. Members are always free to terminate their own membership, but a local church can also have in its constitution a procedure by which it can terminate membership, a part of what we would call church discipline. Is this provision enough of a safe-guard for the church? Is it possible to base church membership on a clear understanding of baptism and covenant, so that all new members need to fulfil the requirements of baptism and to assent to or sign the church covenant? In this way the basis and requirements of membership are clear but it can be seen as an invitation to encounter the grace of God in baptism and in covenant relationships. Membership is a threshold to an experience of God in human community to which others are invited. There is no visiting or voting, but baptism, for those un-baptised, and signing a covenant.

This is certainly a more risky approach to membership. It hopes and assumes that difficult and disputed issues can be handled pastorally within the caring relationships of the church, perhaps a better option than a church meeting, but allows the church the ultimate ability to terminate membership where it deems it absolutely necessary. But it is an attempt to rethink membership in a much more positive and relational way. A local church may take this further, and have an annual covenant service, perhaps at the beginning of the year, or as part of the church anniversary. At such a service individuals are invited to sign the church covenant anew, with those away that day signing at other opportunities and new members signing the covenant when they join. With adequate provision made for those who are housebound, in hospital, serving abroad etc, could these be the members

of the church for the following year? This would tie membership clearly with those in committed relationships to each other and avoid the problem of a long list of paper members, who for a variety of reasons are no longer part of the covenant community.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to suggest that we need to renew our thinking and practice on church membership, in order to make it more fully reflect what we actually believe about church. There is much more thinking to be done, and there is just a great need for churches to experiment with practice so that those who do join our churches experience membership as an exciting threshold that offers a deeper experience of God. Such thinking and acting will have consequences for other areas of church life. If membership is really understood and experienced as covenant relationships then the Church Meeting, for example, as it is often experienced, will need radical change, so that it reflects the ethos of relationships rather than a business agenda. And such renewed thought and practice are necessary, for this remains a crucial area in which we need to reflect the nature of God and be true to the Gospel. **bmj**

<sup>1</sup> In addition to the BUGB Membership pack see, for example, Andrew Rollinson's Whitley lecture, *Liberating Ecclesiology*, which although not directly addressing this issue, recognises that there are significant implications for our understanding of membership.

<sup>2</sup> Particular Baptist Confession, 1644, Appendix, in William L Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Chicago: Judson Press, 1959).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Roger Hayden, *English Baptist History and Heritage*, (BUGB, 2005), pp. 17-25

# Seeking Unity: Baptists and Independent Methodists in Covenant Partnership

**Rosemary Kidd** pursues a conversation with the Independent Methodists

Baptists and Independent Methodists are on the threshold of opportunity. A year ago a Covenant Partnership was signed, bringing us into a new relationship with one another, enabling a mutuality of relating and resourcing that seeks to draw us ever closer together over the next five years. Our vision is that we will merge in 2009, with the invitation to Independent Methodist churches to become open membership Baptist Union churches, so bringing to fulfilment a dialogue that has gone on over many years.

Not all Baptist ministers will have had the opportunity to meet Independent Methodist Christians. Their ninety-two churches are mostly found in our Northern and North Western Associations (twenty five and sixty churches, respectively) with small clusters in one or two other places such as Bristol and York. Two or three of the churches number between seventy and one hundred members; the majority are small congregations. As a result of crucial votes at the Baptist Union Council and at the Independent Methodist Assembly of 2004, all these churches totalling some two thousand five hundred people have been welcomed amongst us as 'provisional Union churches', and are now beginning to play a part in the life of our Associations as well as our wider structures.

This is a very significant move for both parties. Any such partnership produces challenges, and there needs to be a willingness on the part of all of us to make it work. For Baptists in the south of the country, this conversation might feel remote, but marriages are not to be 'undertaken lightly', and the contributions of Independent Methodists will inevitably reshape all of us in various ways. So it is crucial that we all learn how to grow together in order to discover a creative, empowering future that will strengthen us for mission.

I went to have a conversation with Mr Geoffrey Lomas to see what I could learn. Geoff is a recent President of the Independent Methodist Churches and continues to be a key person in the negotiations that have taken place with the Baptist Union. I was warmly welcomed into his home on the outskirts of Manchester, and as I listened to his enthusiastic description of the history and life of the Independent Methodist churches, I could hear considerable resonance with much of our Baptist tradition and beliefs. The Independent Methodists arose as small pockets of dissent two hundred years ago, as Baptists had done over a hundred years before that. The Independent Methodists celebrated their bicentenary in 2005 - a momentous year and a momentous occasion. Their first chapel was established in Warrington, by a small society of Quaker and Methodist Christians, seeking religious freedom and independence. Members built the chapel with their own hands, during lunch breaks from their everyday work. Their worship space was simple, with wooden benches and a table, from which the Word was faithfully preached each Sunday. They were first known as 'Quaker Methodists', or 'Singing Quakers'. Their simple, Word-focussed worship satisfied a thirst for Gospel teaching, and gradually the group

of churches grew. They were mainly founded in relatively poor communities, often in pockets of industry and mining, communities that have more recently experienced decline and unemployment.

So much denominational character mirrors Baptist tradition that there is a natural affinity between us. There is fundamental ownership of the life and direction of the local church by the members. The church meeting is the essential decision-making forum, and members are directly responsible for their mission and the calling of ministers of the Word. Many would use the word 'autonomous', as a description of their church independence. In practice, however, they have strong allegiances to their network of Independent Methodist churches; their denominational magazine is called 'Connexion'. Geoffrey Lomas prefers to describe this as an 'inter-dependent', rather than an 'independent' relationship. It is interesting that this dynamic balance between independence and centralisation surfaces as a sensitive issue in Baptist life in just the same kind of way.

The spectrum of theological persuasion amongst Independent Methodists parallels the range within our Baptist Union churches. Many of their churches are members of the Evangelical Alliance, and many integrate freely with their local Churches Together Groups. Some are deeply committed to community outreach. The church in Stockton Heath in Warrington, for example, has a gamut of community provision, such as children's groups, a drop-in for drug users, coffee mornings etc. An Independent Methodist minister in Newcastle initiated mission outreach to the homeless people; a double-decker bus offers a soup kitchen and a worship centre. The project continues as an independent charitable trust.

So much for the similarities; what about the differences? We do have very different historical origins. The Independent Methodists are over a century younger than British Baptists. They originated from Methodist and Quaker congregations, and still use much recognisably Methodist terminology. They are not, and never have been part of the mainstream Methodist Connexion, however. Sometimes the overlap of terminology can be confusing, because words simply do not have the same meanings in two totally different ecclesiologies.

Independent Methodist churches are organised into Circuits. These are much more like Baptist Associations than they are like the Circuits of the Methodist Church, because there is no centralised leadership, and the manner of ministerial provision is quite distinctive. Methodist ministers in the mainstream Connexion are stationed in a Circuit by the Stationing Conference. They are paid centrally, relocated at intervals during their service, and finally 'step down', to become super-numeric ministers in yet another Circuit, on retirement. None of this applies to Independent Methodist ministers, however. They are a different breed altogether! The vast majority remain unpaid. I use the term advisedly, because these ministers are 'tent makers' rather than lay pastors. Historically, they all worked full time, many as coal miners or in local businesses, and were totally integrated into local communities. No doubt this was in stark contrast to the then established church incumbents, whose education and preferment elevated them above their congregations. The Independent Methodists witnessed at the 'coal face', sharing their lives with people who knew them to be preachers on Sundays. They were both industrial chaplains and local pastors. Their integrity as God's servants would have been utterly

transparent. The strength of this historical 'tent making' model is easily appreciated, and may well be something that can enrich our own understanding. What opportunities for mission there must have been for ministers working and preaching in small impoverished northern churches over the last two centuries, readily accessible during working hours, and on call as pastors in their own homes.

We live in a different world today. Full time employment takes many people away from where they live, only to return, probably to shop, and perhaps relax, eat and sleep. Our lives are considerably more privatised. It puts committed church folk in small churches under pressure, and it has inevitably affected the traditional ministerial model. However, even today there are only a very few paid Independent Methodist ministers. Most are still in full time work, with a strong emphasis on delivering the Word on Sundays, and officiating at weddings and funerals. The number of women in ministry almost equals the number of men.

The ethos of these churches shares much in common with our Baptist heritage. Local Independent Methodist congregations have a very strong sense of commitment to their church life, and they believe strongly in the 'priesthood of all believers', interpreting the Scripture to mean that each individual Christian has an authentic ministry. Yet it is also true to say that their understanding of what makes a minister is not identical to that held by most Baptists. Today's Independent Methodist ministers sense their 'calling' from within their local church. Their 'call' is first recognised by their local fellowship, and then further examined and authenticated at Circuit level. Unlike current Baptist ministers, the candidate remains in the home church and begins his or her ministerial studies on a distance-

learning model, working with a personal tutor appointed by the Circuit. Ministerial students also attend two or three residential training weekends per year, whilst continuing their secular employment and church involvement. Their period of probation lasts from the time of selection, for four years, but in the third year there is personal review and some of the candidates commonly opt to withdraw from training, and continue their service, enriched by their Biblical studies. Those who complete the four years are recognised by the denomination but almost always go on serving in their own congregation, rarely moving to another location except when secular employment forces such a move. Their service of recognition and induction would not especially include the laying-on-of-hands. Some of the larger churches are fortunate in having several qualified ministers; many of the smaller ones have none.

The Church meeting can appoint anyone from among their number to lead services, including Communion, a cherished tradition that we all hold in common. Each Independent Methodist church, however, has a President who traditionally led services and chaired meetings, but who was not necessarily a minister.

One of the major difficulties for this denomination of small churches is the increasing problem of providing skills and education to ensure effective ministry to the churches. Our Covenant Partnership seeks to enable shared theological discussion and access to existing Baptist theological resources. We are fully committed to a mutual recognition of ministers, while understanding that our traditions do differ, offering both the opportunity to learn from the other.

There are inevitably differences of perspective to be explored and theological



divergences to be resolved as we work out our Covenant Partnership. We have so much in common, such as our commitment to local church government. We share a passion for religious freedom; it is a conviction intrinsic to the spiritual character of the Baptist Union and of the Independent Methodist Churches. But one of the crucial differences concerns baptism. Independent Methodist churches currently practice both believer's baptism and infant baptism, setting out the following approach:

Detailed Biblical teaching on the subject shall be given to all applicants before baptism takes place. Candidates are accepted on the basis of their personal confession of faith and their visible commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ.

In churches which operate infant baptism, the person who is to conduct the service shall interview parents wishing to have their children brought for baptism prior to the service. Subject to his or her satisfaction of their commitment as Christians, the service shall take place within a scheduled time of public worship at an appropriate point.

It may be surprising to note that here is no equivalence to confirmation. It would not be unusual for a believer who had been baptised as an infant to witness to mature faith by immersion.

The practice of infant baptism has emerged from historical and cultural roots. In reality, it is more often seen as a rich pastoral and evangelical opportunity, rather than as a strongly held theological position, and certainly believers' baptism has become much more usual amongst Independent Methodists than used to be the case. But there is no doubt that this will be an important part of the journey over coming years, as joining with the Baptist Union does require assent to our

Declaration of Principle. It will be important to both worship and dialogue together.

The decision of the Independent Methodist churches to covenant with the Baptist Union is a courageous step to take for a small denomination. It will probably be their most significant decision in two hundred years. They covet their proud history of independence and local service, but their mission is vulnerable, simply because they are poor, compared with the collective strength and resources of Baptist Union. Their work would benefit from 'outsourcing', drawing on Baptist resources, and Baptists will have the privilege to share in the sheer evangelical grit of these resilient churches. If this partnership is to bear fruit, Independent Methodists will need to know that they are genuinely welcome. They will be looking for signals of reciprocity of respect and appreciation. They will be very wary of being engulfed and invisible as the years go by and of losing their distinctive denominational history and identity.

When I asked Geoffrey Lomas what he most looked forward to, he said that he dearly hopes that Independent Methodist Churches "will be freed to move from maintenance into mission". That is a hope we must share. The hard work of bringing our two church structures together is immense, with legal, trust, financial and theological issues needing to be tackled. In addition, the building of relationships, particularly in the two northern associations, will take much time and commitment. But if all this results in a stronger witness for God's kingdom, then our coming together will be worth it. **bmf**

# Adjustments in retirement

David Baker, Rushden

After just over two years of retirement from forty years of full time ministry I feel that I am just beginning to adjust and to settle down to a new way of life. For everyone there will be the period of adjustment but it will vary from person to person and will depend a lot on the personality and attitude of the person concerned and also on the circumstances of the situation. So that this can be reasonably brief I want to group what I have to say under three headings.

## Practical adjustments

Having lived in "tied accommodation" for forty years we needed a house. This was provided for Pauline and myself by the "Retired Baptist Ministers' Housing Society (RBMHS). I can offer nothing but praise for the way they supported us from the very beginning and have continued to do so. We chose to move to Rushden, Northamptonshire, both for family reasons and also because the price of property was lower there than in some places. With the help of the RBMHS we obtained a three bedroom ex-council house which also had an old shed, joined to the house, converted into a fourth bedroom; this has become a study, something I considered to be essential. The rent is very reasonable – a quarter of what we should be paying commercially. Of course we had to adjust to paying Council Tax and the Water Rate. Regarding the latter we decided to have a water meter fitted and this has proved to be cost effective, especially as there are only two of us. This suggestion came from the pre-retirement course, set up by the Ministry Department. Of this course I could say more; suffice to say at this point that it was a very useful preparation for retirement and I would strongly encourage others to go to it; if possible taking their husband or wife.

In one sense our new situation gives Pauline and I a sense of security and freedom as it is the first house we have lived in that is not tied to my work.

Consequently we can settle here and not think of the possibility of moving, unless we want to. We have a secure tenancy, and good support from the RBMHS. Clearly others are able to make different provisions but the principle is the same; you no longer live in a Manse! We are one of the community; although before we moved the neighbours knew that I was a retired "vicar"! On our road we have only eight houses and people are quite friendly. Also we are 'ordinary' church members, which leads me to my next point.

## Role adjustments

This is not easy and, as I have indicated, can take a while. I decided to take a rest from preaching for the first three months so that I could have time to adjust to a new way of life. We worship at a local Baptist Church of about 110 members, having gone there anonymously before retiring, to try it out! When we moved to Rushden in 2003, there was no minister but, I am thankful to say, the Deacons did not put any pressures on me. There was a very able Moderator who steered the church through quite a difficult time. After three months I took some services; I also did some pastoral visits, something I have always enjoyed. However, I have learned to say "no" where appropriate, especially in matters of administration, committees etc!

A few months ago we called a minister after nearly three year's interregnum; they

had been in this position for a year when we moved to Rushden. We had transferred our membership to the church after being there for three months and it was, for us, the first time we had ever been involved from the church membership's side in the calling of a minister as we had had a Methodist background where the appointment system is different. Since our minister, arrived we have got to know him and his wife, and have built up a good relationship with them. He is happy for me to help with the visitation as the church is quite large and has a number of activities. I go to some Church Meetings but keep in the background. I was approached about standing for the Diaconate but did not feel that it was right for me. Clearly ministers vary; I know of one colleague who is on the Eldership of his church. Each of us has to find our own place within the church fellowship.

As far as preaching is concerned we seem to live in an Association that is blessed with a good supply of Lay Preachers and retired Ministers. Consequently I have had very few preaching opportunities so far, although one or two have opened up recently.

Role adjustment is not easy. It would take too long to share the journey I have taken to do this. However, in the last point I want to share some personal experiences which, I hope, may be of help to others.

### **Spiritual adjustments**

The first point to make, which seems quite obvious, is that although I have retired from full time ministry I am still a Christian and have a place in God's purposes. As one or two have said to me: *"you are still in the Lord's service"*. This is clearly obvious but it does need stressing and working out in each new situation. Losing our role does not mean, of course, losing our walk with God. However, it raises

various questions and it has made me look, again, at how my discipleship must work out in my present situation. I cannot speak for anyone else as we are all individuals but one important lesson I have had to re-learn is something I have often preached: that my value before God does not depend on my role as minister but on my own relationship with Him which is due, solely, to his love for me shown in Jesus Christ. This truth is tested once our role is changed! We have to realise, afresh, that whatever we do or do not do, we are still children of God. Emotionally, I see retirement from full time Ministry like a bereavement; it is the loss of a role I have been in for a number of years. Some of the same symptoms that people find when they have lost somebody are there: numbness, denial, anger/depression, various questionings about where we are going; then, eventually, comes real acceptance. I say "real" because I have had times over the past two years when I thought I had accepted it but then realised I had not done so. I expect I shall still have questions and ups and downs – in a way this is inevitable – but I think I can say that I am now accepting my new role and am actually enjoying it!

As far as interests are concerned I still try to do a bit of serious reading; I like reading in general, anyway. Now I am taking a few services it is stimulating my mind as well as my spirit; the difference is that the pressure to meet dead lines is off! I found that during the last three years in my final pastorate I was beginning to get tired and was finding ordinary tasks more difficult to do and dead lines more of an effort to meet; one of the results of being over 60!

It is also good to have more time to play the piano and to try to bring back my standard to Grade 6, the one I reached in my teens. This ability has sometimes come

in useful in church situations. Also we both like walking and I try to do a bit each day. Pauline is getting me interested in learning to identify birds as we explore the beautiful countryside in Northamptonshire and nearby Bedfordshire. Pauline herself has joined an art class and her ambition to paint is being realised.

In closing I want to say that over the past two years, as throughout my life, God

has been faithful and has led me all the way, although I have not always been able to see the path ahead. I am quite at home with contemporary worship but do love many of the older hymns. One that sums up my testimony is; "Great is thy faithfulness"; however unsteady my faith is, and however low I may feel God is always faithful and will be to the end.

**bmj**

From the cowardice that dare not face new truth,  
from the laziness that is content with half-truth,  
from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth,  
Good Lord, deliver us.

*A prayer from Kenya (CMS 1976)*

## Holidays

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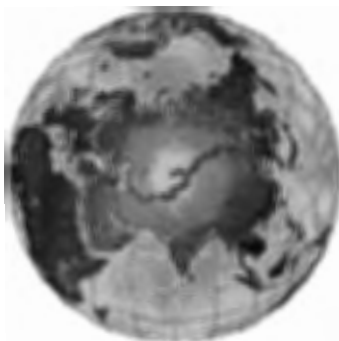
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# Book Reviews

Having made something of a shaky start as Book Reviews Editor, I would like to pay tribute to John Houseago who undertook this task for the BMJ for some ten years until last summer. If, in the fullness of time, I come to achieve half of the level of thoroughness and creativity he brought to the task, I shall be pleased.

In that connection, let me take a moment to suggest to the current readership that if anyone would like to offer to review books for the BMJ they let me know. I have a list of reviewers, some of whom have provided excellent material in the past, but I would be pleased to add new names to the list, and it would be better for the sake of balance if those names weren't just drawn from my own circle of contacts.

A suitable review is about 600 words max. It should include the full title of book and author, the publisher and ISBN no, number of pages and the price. It is helpful to comment on the value of the book for the working minister, and to discuss the content from a theological point of view, perhaps comparing it to other, similar material where appropriate.

'Payment' is by complementary copies of the edition in which a review appears, plus, of course, a copy of the book itself, which will be sent with the request for a review.

Please send contact details, including, if possible, an e-mail address, to (e-mail preferred):

Michael Docker  
[mcdocker@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:mcdocker@blueyonder.co.uk)  
41 Upper Cranbrook Road  
Bristol, BS6 7UR

And indicate, if possible, what areas you are interested in: ie. Bible, Pastoralia,

History, Theology, Church (including ecumenism).

**Michael Docker**

*Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire*  
**Brian J. Walsh & Sylvia C. Keesmaat**  
Inter-Varsity Press, 2004; Authentic Media, 2005 ISBN: 0830827382 (2004 edition) 1842273566 (2005 edition); Paperback: 256 pages; £11.99

As part of a wider question about the use of Scripture today, how can the apostle Paul's first-century letter to the church in Colossae speak directly into our contemporary Western culture? Have we really appreciated and understood the audacity of this revolutionary text?

Whilst not a commentary in its strictest sense, Walsh and Keesmaat's imaginative interpretation of Colossians is a deeply engaging blend of biblical exegesis and contemporary cultural analysis. Their main proposal is that, as an explosive and subversive tract in the context of the Roman empire, the imagination of an alternative vision of reality that the epistle describes should be applied to the imperial realities that we now face in the contemporary West.

There are two particular strengths to the book. Firstly, in their use of the ancient rabbinic interpretive practice called 'targum' (used by rabbis when reading the Torah to the Jews of the Diaspora), Walsh and Keesmaat evocatively create their own extended paraphrases of sections of Colossians. This is an attempt to hear, in contemporary idiom, the subversive nature of the text and how it relates to the emerging cultural context of post-modernism and the empire of global capitalism.

Secondly, throughout the book, interactive dialogues take place between an imaginary student and the authors. These are particularly effective in not only providing a platform for allowing parallels to be made between the ancient world of Colossae and the contemporary Western world, but are a helpful tool for readers, like myself, who are working through the 'hermeneutic of suspicion' that is characteristic of the post-modern worldview.

*Colossians Remixed* indicates how and why the biblical meta-narrative, particularly as portrayed in Colossians, does not legitimate totalization or violence, but rather offers an alternative kingdom of peace and reconciliation centred on the Cross that prevents our imaginations from becoming captive to the powers of the idols of our age.

As a student currently training for ministry, seeking to further understand how scripture can relate to our current cultural shift, I think *Colossians Remixed* is an adventurous and inspiring example of the interface that must occur between biblical hermeneutics and applied theology.

**Andy Scott**  
Congregation-based student in ministry at  
Bristol Baptist College and Tyndale  
Baptist Church, Bristol

*Cries of the Heart – a daily companion for your journey through grief*

**Paul Sheppy**, Canterbury Press, ISBN 1-85311-669-6 £7.99

I'm sure I'm not alone in looking out for good resources to offer to a bereaved person – not so much in the immediate aftermath of a death, but later on, or on those special occasions when, likely, the minister won't be around. There's a lot of stuff on the market, certainly, much of it of the 'Patience Strong' school of sentimentality. Frankly, when I see books, cards, or pamphlets of that kind on

someone's coffee table, my instinct (which I fight bravely..) is like that of the bishop who goes round seeking out parish magazines - to sneak it into my pocket as I leave, before it can do any more harm.

Paul Sheppey's little book looks the part, but comes from a deeper, and more theologically profound place altogether. It's a simple – deceptively simple – volume; quite brief, and physically small enough to carry around. In about 135 pages it offers a set of daily Bible readings, thoughts, and brief prayers, in three sections: 'Forty Days' – to lead through that crucial period immediately after a bereavement; 'Days of Remembrance' – offering material for use on the desperately painful anniversaries that come round all too soon (the first birthday, Christmas, wedding anniversaries and so on) and 'Out of the Depths' - a section offering material for use in particularly difficult situations, such as after a still birth, an accident, or the death of a child.

Each section has a brief introduction that contains as much wisdom in a few lines as can be found in whole manuals of pastoral theology. As a liturgist, Paul Sheppey marshals material from Scripture, the Church and his own reflections in such a way as to set the unavoidable business of grieving firmly in the context of Christian devotion. As a theologian, he knows better than to offer the trite and the over-familiar phrase, and is content gently to prompt people into the presence of God, bringing their own feelings, however raw.

I confess to an initial hesitation when I saw the book, as I have rarely found a 'typical' experience of grieving, and am wary of any formulaic approach that might suggest that one day 'you'll get over it'. But the use of the journey metaphor, and the biblical forty days motif, is anything but formulaic. There is a gentle lead here, and an entirely appropriate introduction of difficult but

vital stages in grieving, such as letting go and moving on, in a way that does not force the pace, or raise unhelpful expectations.

If I were to express any reservations it would be over things which, I suspect, were entirely beyond the author's control. £7.99 is a little on the steep side for what is, unfortunately, a less than high quality publication. The cover is fine, but the individual pages are printed on paper that feels cheap. The typeset and spacing leave something to be desired. One is left with the feeling that if the book is used half as much as it deserves to be, it will soon begin to look and feel tired. Still, this is one book I won't be trying to sneak into my pocket should I see it on a coffee table on a pastoral visit.

**Michael Docker**  
Tyndale, Bristol

*Recycling the Past or Researching History?*  
– *Studies in Baptist Historiography and Myths.*

**Editors: Philip E Thompson and Anthony R Cross** Paternoster 2005; ISBN 1-84227-122-9 Paperback: 331 pages;

This volume is the eleventh in the burgeoning series 'Studies in Baptist History and Thought' and provides a mix of insights into the range of theological attitudes and historical roots gathered together in 'being Baptist'. Thompson and Cross have drawn together contributors from the UK, Canada and America, with one participant from Latvia, who have worked both with broad brush strokes and with fine detail. For most readers this will probably be a 'pick up and dip into' volume, for whilst one's imagination may not immediately be fired by the question "When did Oxford Baptists join the Abingdon Association?" (Larry Kreitzer, Chapter 10) there is more! For example -

Elizabeth Newman helps restore the notion of freedom in faith that comes to God's

priestly people, when the description 'priesthood of all believers' is wrested from its stranglehold as a 'God and me alone' equation. (Chapter 3)

Misperceptions' are countered, as Ian Randall (Chapter 6) challenges those who despise their parents' or grandparents' (early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Baptists) as lacking in spirituality and Anthony Cross (Chapter 7) gives a commentary highlighting the fact that Baptists are not always 'anti-Sacramentalist'. If you subscribe to any of the myths they challenge, it could be good to read what they say. It is a shame, though, that they have continued the confusion of meaning in the vocabulary of 'myth', seeming to use it in pejorative rather than creative fashion.

Although the book is a collection of discrete essays, there are connections which lead from one to another. Stories of "forgotten sisters" (Karen Smith, Chapter 8) introduce the reader to some notable British women who were not seemingly 'of note' in the annals of history.

When Philip E Thompson explores "The Myth of Changelessness in Baptist Life and Belief" (Chapter 9) he is engaging with the distortion of identity which happens when we misrepresent our past in different ways in order to fit with any current habit of mind or spirit. Ambiguity regarding 'tradition' and clearer acknowledgement of 'memory' must be a recognized part of listening properly to our past.

Valdis Teraudkalns' words from a Latvian Baptist context (Chapter 14) counter the still-frequent knee-jerk reaction amongst British Baptists against considerations of episcopacy, and concludes with a quiet passion for the service of church and society, dialogue and interdependence, which may be enabled through the office of Bishop.

Some of the essays may appear rather



technical, and some might criticize it for being parochial. The first criticism is more justified than the second, I think, since self-understanding requires some degree of narrow-focus, and if we learn to understand ourselves a little better our relationships with Christians of other traditions will be better resourced. Those essays which I have found time to go back to read a second time have repaid the effort with interest.

**Hazel Sherman  
Brecon**

*Facing Facts about the Bible*

**Gladys M Smith** 2005; Paperback booklet: 32 pages. Copies £1 each available from Rev Gladys Smith, 24 Upper Way, Farnham, Surrey GU 9 8RG

With apologies for submitting two adjacent reviews in the same volume (the remedy for this is for you to contact Michael Docker and offer to undertake some reviewing!) I would like to draw this booklet to your attention. In a booklet of roughly the same size as this Journal, Gladys Smith has attempted an introduction to some of the recurring stumbling blocks in Bible Study for Christians who are troubled by or feeling

their way out of fundamentalism. The fact that a reader without a working knowledge of Hebrew and Greek is utterly dependent on translations is quite obvious. More difficult may be the introduction of 'parabolic fiction', prophecy as that which is addressed to the prophet's contemporaries (as also apocalyptic), the assertion that the virgin birth of Jesus was not part of the original gospel, and the recognition that the biblical phrase "the word of the Lord" does not refer to the OT. The author addresses some of the issues that people often wrestle with and may be afraid to voice. As part of taking the Bible seriously, it could be helpful for members of Bible Study groups wanting to enlarge their activities from the devotional without turning into dry academics, and needing to free their thinking from the attitudes that are fed by a fear that God might somehow punish them if they start articulating their real questions.

**The Editor**

"Reading ought to be an act of homage to the God of all truth. We open our hearts to words that reflect the reality he has created or the greater reality which he is. It is also an act of humility and reverence towards other men who are instruments by which God communicated his truth to us. Reading gives God more glory when we get more out of it, when it is a more deeply vital act not only of our intelligence but of our whole personality..."

*Thomas Merton*