

“Staying the Course” High Leigh 2000 Conference Report

The first ever *Ministry Today* annual conference took place on 28-29 February 2000 at High Leigh Conference Centre, Hoddesdon, Herts. Entitled “Staying the Course”, all who came agreed that it fully achieved its aims in helping Christian leaders to survive and thrive in ministry.

The keynote address was given by the Rt Revd Mike Hill, Bishop of Buckingham, speaking about factors affecting clergy morale and about ‘aids to long-haul travel’. Seminars addressed a range of issues about staying the course spiritually, in a difficult place, with team relationships, in a small/rural church, and under pressure to ‘succeed’.

On the second day of the conference, Paul Goodliff, a Trustee of RBIM and a Baptist Union Area Superintendent, explored the question of ‘Surviving and Thriving in Ministry’.

Surviving and Thriving in Ministry

Paul Goodliff

(This article is based on a paper delivered at the Ministry Today Conference at High Leigh)

What happens when we do not thrive and survive in ministry?

The frightening thing is, for a long time, not a lot happens! Actually nothing happens for a very long time, at least not so that others would see. The sermons continue to get written and preached, the classes held, the funerals and weddings conducted, the elderly visited. But if we stop long enough to listen and wait, we know that something does not match up. Perhaps that is why we become great activists, incessant visitors, avid attenders of conferences, great committee people and punctilious administrators. Some of us will remain with our heads sufficiently above the murky waters of spiritual mediocrity long enough to draw our pensions. Others will either get out, or more likely be

pushed out, either by a disgruntled congregation or by some self-destructive sexual affair, financial irregularity or psychological breakdown.

What causes us to wither and die as pastors?

At heart, the cause of our diminishing effectiveness lies not in the stresses we face (which, though in many ways peculiar to ministry, are not actually unduly excessive) nor in the opposition we endure, but in our own inner landscape of spirit.

I have become fascinated by the image of the face of Christ and its significance, especially for those who are chronically shamed. I have become convinced that a useful metaphor for the healthy spiritual life is living before the face of Christ. In the Old Testament a phrase used to describe the place of spiritual stability and care is the presence of God. The word for presence (*paneh*) is literally 'face', a metaphor heavy with significance and complexity. Psychologists tell us that our mother's face is the first thing we fall in love with. That face in healthy parenting forms our basic orientation of trust towards the world and affection for ourselves and others. Where that face is not beneficent, where that face spells abuse, anger and rejection, the psyche is almost irreparably damaged, as I know only too well in the experience of some of my counselling clients. Thankfully most of us have the experience of good enough parenting to develop the healthy response and we grow up to transfer the adoration we feel towards that first face to others - those we love with a life-long passion and ultimately, God himself. We live lives which are punctuated by adoration of God, worship of and commitment to Christ, which prevent us from becoming narcissistic and shame-filled, and keep us healthy.

Who would trade such a life for one in which our gaze becomes filled not with the face of Christ, or the presence of God, but with an obsessional self-regard and self-importance? Pastors would, that's who!

Exchanging God for the serpent!

Peterson says a strange thing happens when we get a taste for God. We find it so intoxicating that we try to replicate the experience as God. In other words we get religion. The taste for God is twisted into greed to be God, to be in control of that experience. I get a glimpse of a world in which God is in charge and think maybe I have a chance at it. I abandon the personal

presence of God and take up with the depersonalised and canny serpent. I flee the shining face of God for a slithery world of religion that gives me licence to manipulate people and acquire godlike attributes to myself. ¹

We can live like this for so long because its root causes are hidden to everyone, and after a while to myself as well. We get along just fine in the eyes of others. Provided that we carry on visiting folk and winning their affection, performing the tricks of powerful proclamation, earning their respect, and running a tight ship administratively, they do not give us too much grief. All the while we think we can do this, that we have the power. Is the inability to say no to others' demands a sign of costly service and faithful pastoral care or the misguided belief that we are indispensable? Is the strength of conviction about this programme or that policy the boldness of the Spirit or self delusion? Is this assertive leadership, bolstered by the admiration of a small clique, courageous faith or self-importance? It is not at all easy to tell. Deception is nowhere more common than in religion, and leaders more prone to it than others. It is scarily dangerous to become a leader without the checks and balances, counsel and guidance which keeps us from shipwreck.

If the basic cause of ministerial or pastoral ineffectiveness is fleeing the presence of God and living under our face rather than under the light of Christ's, then the second cause is hopeless mistrust about the basic tasks we are called to exercise and the idealism with which we fantasise about the people that we are called to serve. We go looking for short-cuts and glory, whereas the basic tasks are very mundane and not at all glamorous.

We thought it ought to be about the response of a willing congregation to faithful and powerful preaching, whereas much of it is plain indifference. We thought it ought to be about nurturing holiness in the lives of godly men and women, whereas much of it is shovelling out the muck from church life where gossiping, power-play and plain bitterness flourish. Then we get resentful, cynical and burnt-up and wonder why we no longer want to stay the course, at least not with that band of hopeless ne'er-do-wells, and we go looking for greener grass somewhere else in the

¹ (See *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, 12.)

denominational landscape. In so doing we fail to see that not only is the congregation to which we minister the place where we preach the Word, administer the sacraments, offer pastoral care and lead the community's life. It is also one of two places where we develop virtue, learn to love, become what we preach and learn to thrive in holiness. The other is marriage.

Just as in marriage (I speak as a man here, and none of these is applicable to my wife Gill!) we discover that the wonderful woman we married gets PMT and her size ten figure develops a will of its own and decides size 16 is just fine - so with our congregations. Instead of the glamorous community we half see through rose-coloured glasses in the nationally-celebrated church somewhere else, we find ourselves pastoring "this haphazard collection of people who somehow get assembled into pews on Sundays, half-heartedly sing a few songs most of them don't like, tune in and out of a sermon according to the state of their digestion and the preacher's decibels, awkward in their commitments and jerky in their prayers" (Peterson) and then we get resentful about them.

Worse still we get resentful when they hear God clearer than we do, serve with more grace and less grumbling than we do (in the silence of own hearts, of course), and become more responsive to the Spirit of God than our plans had anticipated. We fall victim to the professional sin of pastors and ministers: pride, arrogance and indifference to what Jesus calls the least of these my brethren.

What can we do to prevent it?

I had a sense of calling to be a pastor from teenage years, laid it to one side in my early twenties only to rediscover it after teaching for four very happy years. But apart from that undeniable call, I am not sure what I thought I was getting into.

What I ended up doing was running a church. Then a year ago I received a call from God as undeniable as the first - to pastor pastors. The danger now is that I end up running an ecclesiastical area, a sort of Baptist diocese of four counties, 168 churches with a host of administrative tasks to fulfil in order to ensure the thing keeps on the straight and narrow, with committees attended, reports written, ministerial candidates' vocations tested and settlements facilitated.

What will help me to thrive in my calling and you in yours? Actually very much the same things: to attend to God in prayer; to

attend to the Scriptures in study; and to attend to others in pastoral care and spiritual direction or companionship. To live out my vocation with passion rather than simply oil the wheels of a religious system requires attention to these fundamentals.

The need for asceticism

I do not like this - in fact I hate it - but I need the experience of asceticism. The monastic tradition knew this, the Protestants of a previous age knew this, but we know little of it. We think we know a great deal about it, but instead we have consumerised spirituality to such an extent that we fool ourselves into thinking that a few 'spiritual disciplines' equates to asceticism, as if it were a commodity that we can imbibe from the latest spiritual blockbuster. It is a fantasy that spirituality is susceptible to the same technological mindset that gives us techniques of evangelism and church growth. At the heart of this is prayer, the building of a monastic cell in the heart of a busy life. Most of us fail miserably at this most of the time, which is why we do not thrive in ministry, even if we manage to survive.

Peterson argues that a 'spiritual disciplines' approach to the spiritual life just encourages a 'pick-and-mix' approach that is part of the current post-modern *zeitgeist*. Instead he argues that common worship/Psalms/recollected prayer (random, unscheduled remembrance of what has been prayed already) is fundamental for everyone. Is this his cultural totalitarianism, or simply what has been the tradition for over a thousand years of the church?

In short what sustains us and nourishes us is probably what wise tutors tried to teach us in college if we were lucky, or that we might have picked up on the way from older, wiser friends if we had bothered to listen - pray within the patterns of history, read the Scriptures and much else besides; pastor the people of God without illusions until you really love them; and quit thinking of them as those who are the problem or the enemy, thwarting what you want to achieve. Get the kind of support and care that will neither be abusive, nor collusive with your own carnal desire to avoid the asceticism without which we shall not remain safe. Use all of this as the cell within which God might just shape us up for eternity.

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