

Trends in Ministry

Michael Bochenski

In the 1960s, songwriter Bob Dylan sang:

'If your time to you is worth savin',
Then you'd better start swimming
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a changin'
'There's a battle outside and it is ragin'
It'll soon shake your windows and rattle your walls
For the times they are a changin'
'..... your old road is rapidly agein'
Please get out of the new one
If you can't lend your hand
For the times they are a changin'
'The present now will later be past
The order is rapidly fadin'
And the first one now will later be past
For the times they are a changin'.'

Never has that been more true than it is today. Here are some of the changes that we are experiencing in ministry and in our churches and society as the new century begins:

- A move to appreciating that ministry really is better done in teams of some sort rather than solo.
- An awareness that without appraisal we will continue to make the same mistakes again and again.
- A decline in deference to the Minister and her or his office.
- A growing emphasis on the importance of the whole context of worship and not just preaching.
- A cry for new ways of preaching, including storytelling and interactivity.
- Understandings of spirituality broader than the traditional 'means of grace' models.
- Post-modern assumptions that no authority figures are to be trusted and that most truths are equally valid and then only to the person concerned.
- The debate about whether ministers are 'holders of an office' or employees of the church.

- Increasing experiences of repeat abuse in the relationships between ministers and churches.
- The materialism of so much Christian home and family life.
- The struggle for each new convert - often coming now only in ones and twos where once whole groups would prepare for baptism and membership.
- The growing dependence of the church on new means of communication and information technology.
- ‘Commitment-phobia’ (David Staple), when people will commit only to short-term projects or to a particular person and when many of us struggle to fill our diaconates and elderates.
- The tensions between ‘ordination is for life’ and more functional understandings of ministry in an at times economically hostile climate, not least for ageing ministers.
- A growing awareness that we are ‘strangers no longer but pilgrims together’ in an increasingly post-denominational church.
- A limited amount of energy and time left in most churches for anything but the most basic attempts at clustering and associating.
- The absence of ‘first contact’ situations where whole churches - and indeed most Christians - have withdrawn from meaningful relationships with non-Christians.
- A sense of the interconnectedness of the global village which can lead to depression and compassion-fatigue as we become overawed by the sheer scale of the problems.
- The failure of the ‘suction model’ of church growth sometimes coupled with a commitment to pioneering sector ministries such as chaplaincies and community workers.
- Stress as a growing feature of contemporary church life as well as of the society we are called to serve.
- Growing divisions within our nation and Baptist Union between those ministering in and to affluent Britain and those in the Other Britain who are not waving but drowning.
- Dominant values, inside our churches as well as beyond them, which are becoming increasingly distanced from those of the Bible and gospel

The spirituality of Jesus

In the face of such change, we do well to pause for a moment and reflect on the spirituality of Jesus. In Mark 1.35-39, the evangelist

tells that: “Very early the next morning, Jesus got up and went to a place where he could be alone and pray. Simon and the others started looking for him. And when they found him, they said, ‘Everyone is looking for you.’ Jesus replied, ‘We must go to the nearby towns, so that I can tell the good news to those people. This why I have come.’ Then Jesus went to Jewish meeting places everywhere in Galilee, where he preached and forced out demons.”

We are all still unpacking those three remarkable years which 2000 years on continue to transform world history. In Graham Kendrick’s words: “2000 years and still the flame is burning bright across the lands. Hearts are waiting, longing, aching, for awakening once again”. Jesus’ life and example remain the model for us all in contemporary ministry.

He knew what it was to minister in rapidly changing times and had his own coping mechanisms which we glimpse in Mark 1. Here we gain some clues to Jesus’ own spirituality. Jesus, far better than any of us, knew how and when to relax and retreat and when to engage and confront. The ministry of Jesus shows us the importance of a balance of doing and being, retreat and fight, busyness and prayer. In particular, he had coping mechanisms for stress and for conflict. There could be no running away from the conflict. Sometimes he knew that he had to engage and fight:

- The Pharisees with their abuses of the Law and their superior attitudes to ordinary people.
- The disciples in their stubbornness and blindness at times.
- The evil one when the temptation to give in grew very strong.
- The temptation to withdraw from the crowds and stay there when they had need of him.

Sometimes he knew that He had to withdraw and pray to regain strength to fight and serve another day.

- See Mark 1.21, 39 - the discipline of synagogue worship.
- The Sermon on the Mount with its insights into Jesus’ own prayer life
- The Feast of Tabernacles - knowing when to stay away and when to appear.
- The Transfiguration followed by the valley below.
- Gethsemane - supremely.

Jesus knew that all the power he needed comes from God. It is probable that Mark 1 describes a time of crisis and stress for him.

Mark's gospel is structured in such a way as to see the escalation of growing conflict, which culminates in the horrors of Good Friday. Here we see the spiritual battle with evil, the pressures of crowds flocking to him and the quiet of his first thirty years left behind. Behind the Greek of this passage 'started looking for him' (v.36) is a more unpleasant meaning which can be translated: 'harassed', 'tracked' or 'hunted Him down'. However, Jesus has met with his Father. He has withdrawn and shared it all with him. As a humorous poster puts it: *Don't just do something; sit there.* Now it is the time to fight, to tackle the issues head on, to minister the gospel and engage yet again. Stanley Browne used to say: "Pray as if everything depended on prayer; then work as if everything depended on work."

In all of this our Lord had time to notice and care for an individual - the leper. Some of the finest ministers I have known have been the ones who, for all their busyness, make you feel that you have their undivided attention when you are with them. Jesus did that.

Three possible responses

There are three possible responses we can make as ministers to the scenario of changing times. Well, four actually, but throwing in the towel is hardly an option to commend!

- Developing our personal spirituality
- Committing to ongoing Ministerial Formation
- Opting into an appropriate appraisal programme.

Personal spirituality

My own pattern of prayer is one I have evolved over the years. All of my life is prayer in one sense. I am always aware of Jesus' presence all around me that I share all I am and all I am doing with Him at all times. The following ingredients work for me, but may not work for everyone.

1. Prayer without ceasing. In Thomas Merton's words: "Prayer is the distilled awareness of our entire life before God ... The deepest prayer at its nub is a perpetual surrender to God".
2. Prayer in tongues has been part of my prayer life since the heady days of charismatic renewal in the 1970s.
3. The traditional Quiet Time goes back to my conversion in 1968. Sally Magnusson writes of Eric Liddell in *Chariots of Fire*: "He

seemed to get his strength and self-discipline and his air of quiet serenity from his early morning sessions of prayer, meditation and Bible study. He would come out from that and stride through the rest of the day Whatever it was that he received in those morning sessions, he spent the rest of the day giving it out to others ... somewhere in there also lay the secret of how he ran". It may be uncool in some quarters but it still works for me too!

4. Adequate rest. I've learned the value in a busy life of lying down when I can and resting. I listen to music, watch television, read a book or simply enjoy what some call a snooze but is now called a 'power nap'.
5. The means of grace - Sunday worship, reading of Scripture, prayer and holy communion.
6. Sixth, practising the presence of God.
7. Seventh, a range of other expressions of spirituality eg occasional Retreats.

There is no one way when it comes to our personal spirituality. We each need to find what works for us and relax into it. Pray as you can; not as you can't. As Thomas à Kempis used to pray: "Toughen me Lord with Heaven's strength".

Ministerial formation

The ways we respond under God to some of these experiences affect not just ourselves but whole Christian communities.

Ministers often feel that they are being pulled in several directions at once. This is often done by people who should know better and who show scant regard for the effects of all of this on the minister as a person, a human being, a brother or sister in Christ. In many churches the minister is expected to be a combination of Spring Harvest worship-leader, reverent and traditional compère of the hymn-prayer-sandwich; gifted youth leader, but also good with their families and with the older folk; to spend lots of time with his or her family, yet always available to all; a wonderful Bible teacher, yet never preach more than ten minutes. All of this and more in one person! These strains and conflicts are at times quite crippling. Similar pressures can be brought to bear on ministers over ecumenical or theological matters.

Basil Fawltly meets Bob Cratchit meets t Upwardly Mobile

Some of the stories sent to me have moved me to tears. For example, there is the Basil Fawlty model of ministry. Here, some of the stress and conflict in ministry is self-induced. More accurately it is created by character weaknesses in the minister him or herself. Sadly no-one has the courage or the time or the ability to take Basil aside, spend time with him, help him to see his strengths and weaknesses and so save the hotel business from collapse or him from further catastrophe. It has been my practice in each pastorate to seek a mentor with freedom to speak into my life and ministry. But there is a bigger issue here. Who cares for the carers? There is a huge need for networks of support, and for systems of guided self-appraisal. The inevitable loneliness of the job means that there is a need for pro-active support rather than reactive fire-fighting by our regional and national leaders. These concerns have emerged again and again in conversations with ministers over two decades.

Then there is Bob Cratchit, Scrooge's hard-working and underpaid and under-appreciated nephew. Here we must be careful! Many in Britain are far worse off than even the lowest paid ministers. Nor do they have a heavily subsidised roof over their heads. Money worries, however, exacerbate many difficulties in ministry and add to both the stress and conflict levels of local church life. The monthly stipend trusted to the professionalism - or otherwise - of Christians in a local church is not always the kindest way of payment! In some Free Churches it is not unheard of for wages to be paid very late to remind the minister who are his or her paymasters or for haggles over legitimate expenses to take exhausting turns. Nor is it unusual for churches to batter their minister into a lower stipend settlement 'to help with the church finances'. Some ministers are experiencing considerable financial strain in addition to other pressures - more month than money in fact. It is hard to live and function like that. Is it really so surprising that credit card debt is rife among Christian leaders or that many long to retire - with their peers - in their late 50s and early 60s, and yet often cannot?

Finally there is the upwardly mobile, the ordained version of the Yuppie, the product of Mrs Thatcher's 1980s and Gordon Brown's 1990s. Success is all. Business techniques must be transferred to the local church. Churches must grow in all kinds of ways. How many baptisms this month/quarter/year? How many new churches

planted? How large is your music group? How big is your offering? How many on your leadership team? How well equipped is your church office? And so it goes on. Even ministers' gatherings offer no sanctuary as the "How big is yours?" mentality invades the conversation. There is a desperate need for discernment in this area. Not all secular business or management techniques are redeemable. The ministerial casualties can be as severe as any Black Wednesday.

In closing a word of caution may be helpful. In Mary Anne Coate's words, "the pressures are not really that great and in any case no greater than those which assail others in comparable positions of community leadership ... it is just that ministers do not cope very well with this kind of pressure".²

An Appraisal Programme

The quotes that follow are taken from Michael Jacob's *Holding in Trust - the appraisal of ministry* (SPCK, 1991). Good appraisal methods can help us to cope with stress and conflict.

"Appraisal forms part of this process and may enable ministers to make sufficient adjustments to life style, work patterns and attitudes to help prevent the devastating effects of those breakdowns to which continuously unsupported and untended ministry is prone." Should it be compulsory? Probably. Private reflections on how well we are doing, or not, are not enough.

"The clergy who would most benefit from appraisal are those most likely to avoid it if left to their own devices." Who should undertake it? There are several options: Self-appraisal. Appraisal by an external authority. Guided self-appraisal helped by a trained, neutral external appraiser. Appraisal face to face in a small group. Guided self-appraisal in a peer group. Customer appraisal by 'consumers'.

What should it include? Jacobs lists the following: leading worship, preaching and teaching, group work, personal skills, chairing ability, children's and youth work, evangelism, pastoral work, discipling, spirituality, personal issues, family and leisure, administration, associating, ecumenism, community involvement, vision and planning

² *Clergy Stress - the Hidden Conflicts in Ministry*, SPCK, 1989.

He also points out that the appraisal will need to take into account the local church setting to be most effective. It is more difficult to blossom in a church saddled with difficulties.

One observation. Appraisal is not to be confused with review. Some have people in our churches who will use any chance to undermine our ministry and even try to bring about its end. The main purpose of appraisal should be that of ministerial formation and development, not giving ammunition to such characters. The parable of the talents seems singularly relevant to this question of appraisal. "Those who are prepared to lay their talents on the line and look, either on their own or preferably with the aid of another's vision, in a critical and constructive way at their life and work as a servant of God, do have the opportunity of finding rewards in this particular aspect of their ministry".

Ministry - the new century version

For all of these challenges, I believe we can and should continue to thank God for the enormous privilege of serving Jesus in this way.

'If your time to you is worth savin',
Then you'd better start swimming
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a changin'.'

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Sermons - again!

John Drane

Introduction

In April 1999, I gave an address to the ministers of the Baptist Union of Great Britain at their annual assembly. The topic was 'Tomorrow's Pastors May Not Preach', and this article is a summary of what I said on that occasion. The title wasn't my own choice, though it was certainly eye-catching, and on the Sunday before, a lay leader (older man) in my own church asked me what I was planning to say. When I told him, he immediately said, 'Well,