

EDITORIAL: Two major 'beefs' about ministers

Paul Beasley-Murray

I have two major 'beefs' about some of my brother and sister ministers, even though I deeply respect and honour them.

The first relates to attendance at ministers' gatherings. As far as I am concerned, once I have committed myself to attend a ministers' meeting, then I have committed myself. Unless it is a family crisis, nothing else will take precedence. Alas, I seem to be a voice in the wilderness. Time and again we get last minute apologies from ministers who are 'too busy' or who have a funeral on that day. I don't buy those excuses. We are all busy - it is a question of priorities. As for funerals, any minister worth their salt should be able to negotiate times which are suitable to them. The fact is that, save in exceptional circumstances, there should be no reason why a minister cannot attend his local ministers' meeting. Indeed, to express the issue more positively, there is every reason why a minister should allow his fellow ministers to have the priority.

This does not just apply to ministers' meetings. I believe, for instance, that any 'hurting' minister in my area has a claim on my time. I will do anything if I can help a fellow minister (or minister's spouse) in distress. This includes prayer. When I was ordained, I became a member of the Baptist Ministers' Fellowship, and in so doing I agreed to pray for my colleagues every Sunday morning. Not only do I seek to do this, I also list in my prayer diary the names of individual ministers for whom I am concerned, as well as the names of those who are part of the various ministerial groupings to which I belong. I have a special commitment to my fellow ministers. This means that I turn up to meetings, whether I feel like it or not. Why do others think differently?

My second 'beef' relates to the apparent inability of ministers to answer letters or e-mails - or at least to answer them promptly. As I write, it was two weeks ago that I e-mailed eight ministers with a view to fixing up a date of a meeting. Only two have bothered to reply. Would that this were exceptional - in fact it is par for the course. Am I alone in finding this not just impolite, but also a sign of sloppiness, if not laziness? Wow, this is strong language! But how else can one put it? Let me make it clear: I am not arguing for ministers to reply to an e-mail within the hour. That would mean

ministers being glued to the computer, and that would raise other questions relating to their ministry. But is it not possible to reply within 48 hours - even if it is just a holding reply, acknowledging receipt of the e-mail and promising to attend to the matter in due course? Any secular business would go under if it failed to answer its e-mails. Should not we, who are - to use the old jargon - 'in the King's business', be no less efficient?

This links into another conviction: I believe ministers should not be ashamed of being professionals. This means that ministers should seek to excel in whatever they do - only their best is good enough for God. If that were true, then they would have no difficulty in being prompt in answering letters and e-mails. Why then are there those who act differently?

PREACHING AMIDST THE RUINS OF CHRISTENDOM

Glen Marshall

Tutor at Northern Baptist College, Manchester

Preaching and context

The genius of preaching is its ability to take with equal seriousness the ancient text and the contemporary context. To lose contact with text is to become a guru dispensing home spun wisdom rather than a servant of the word; to lose contact with the here and now is to turn the pulpit into a lecturer's podium. Preaching is the ministry of the word made fresh. This article addresses one aspect of our context: the phenomenon known as post-Christendom.

The passing of Christendom is a contextual issue on the macro level. Whereas most contextual questions relate to local peculiarities (What is the socio-economic make up of my congregation? What are the challenges facing our community? What events have touched our fellowship this week?), our concern here is with bigger realities. Rather than mapping local topography, we will be responding to the cultural equivalent of continental drift.