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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 the tensions which runs through our lives as ministers is the calling to care and nurture within the 'household' and to live with eyes and ears open for the prophetic word which unsettles the church and undermines all worldly perspective in church and world.

It is not a tension unique to ministers, we know that. But there are days when the nature and variety of our work may make us particularly aware of it. Days when we may have gone from a case conference involving people from different agencies working at a difficult issue involving a member of our congregation, to being harangued outside the supermarket about the deficiencies and hypocrisy of organised religion, to getting to the middle of a study group and struggling to respond to the person who says "I just don't know how to cope with the luxury of being able to sit here and discuss the Lord's Prayer when I've just watched the news coming out of Sudan. What do we think we're doing? How can it matter?" Doubtless each can relate similar experiences.

When we read and write and talk about the church, we feel as if we may be 'closing our eyes' to the world. But when we read and write and talk about the world, we are criticised for producing only 'social concern'.

And yet, when we look again, we realise that to talk about the church can only be to talk about the church in the world. It's not as simple as 'getting our own house in order.' We know that, too. But the fabric of connection between the household of faith and 'the kingdoms of this world which shall become the kingdom of our God' is being woven from

and with those who will give up on neither church or world. (And with others, too – but we are most probably in the former group).

A cursory glance at the titles of articles in this issue of the Journal may suggest an over-concern with church. But look again and you will find Michael Quicke's reminder that 'preaching Jesus' has more to do with Jesus preaching 'through' us than with us preaching about Jesus. To put ourselves in places where that can happen must involve us 'immersing' in Scripture – and immersing in Scripture engages us with God's kingdom in the world.

Baptismal discussions were once categorised as 'ecumenical debate' – but deliberately seek to do justice in our churches to the many different ways by which God draws people to follow Christ and we have a rather different story to tell.

Weddings and funerals are not just particular services which we offer – but are celebratory events in a world that needs ritual and which will look to an increasing number of alternatives if we shirk the challenge of 'earthing' God's universal compassion.

And Revelation, often perceived as that most arcane book in Scripture, challenges us to live distinctively and ethically counter to stronger economic and social pressure to fit in the norms of an unjust world. **bmj**

'Preaching Jesus'

Michael Quicke, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Chicago - from his address given at Baptist Assembly 2004.

'When I came to you, brothers and sisters I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.' (1 Corinthians 2.1,2).

In the first century it was possible to miss preaching Jesus by proclaiming mystery in eloquence or cleverness - missing who Jesus is by rhetorical grandstanding. In our twenty-first century culture of functioning efficiency it is easier to generalize, platitudinize, deprophetize, detranscendentalize the scandal of Jesus crucified and risen and reigning: to offer programs for Jesus, affirmations about Jesus, cultural connections to help Jesus, so many things on Jesus' behalf yet miss the scandalously dying and living Jesus in the midst.

Perhaps I am jaundiced by some of the church machines I have been part of in the USA. There seems a growing perception that preaching is something that you can do at arm's length from Jesus. The best example is use of on-line sermons. Adverts abound for soundly constructed, anecdotally supercharged sermons. But incarnational preaching means that it is my flesh, my experience, my context, and no amount of second hand experience and skill can make up for absence of personal engagement with Jesus, word and people. I recognize the value of on-line preaching resources in a preacher's spiritual journey with a text. An older generation used books of illustrations and outlines. But when wholesale downloading takes place it diminishes a theology of preaching, of spiritual gifting and calling, by the marketplace of consumer experience. It reduces preaching to technique and its responses to mechanics.

1. First engage with the Lord of Scripture and Jesus in Scripture.

When I wrote *360-Degree Preaching*¹ I indulged in a limited analysis of the state of preaching in the US and UK. Whenever I have a class of students I ask them early on to respond honestly to a question. Most of them are still listeners. 'Do you look forward to hearing the regular preaching in your local church?' Over four years there have been constant responses. Local preachers immodestly put their hands up. It is as rare as a whole congregation sitting in the front rows to find a preacher who recognizes she or he may be dull. But for the rest, the statistics are around one third and never more than half. 'Does this mean that the rest of you do not look forward?' 'No. We enjoy the fellowship. The music is good. The children's work is good. But anticipate preaching. No!' I have cross-referenced and checked out this depressing news. One lady said to me at a reception at the turn of the year. 'You teach preaching. I have been going to church for 45 years and I cannot remember one sermon that touched my life. It is always so predictable.'

There are obvious exceptions in *our* preaching! But listen to people in the pews and their assessment is bleak. I give as my number one reason for this depressing news: *the loss of holistic engagement with Scripture*. It is flat, cerebral, sounds like Bible. It is not alive to preacher. Reason one is quickly followed by *poverty of Holy*

Spirit Power. If preachers do exegesis at all (rather than download), it is commonly driven by commentaries, not by encountering God in Scripture. It is determined by 'working up a sermon' rather than a genuine meeting with the Lord of scripture. Preaching Jesus begins with Jesus.

To address the fundamental flaw of missing Jesus, we need to *immerse* into Scripture. I choose that word partly because of its appropriateness for post-modernity. I add my conviction that too few preachers have understood culture shift as another reason for much ineffective preaching. 'Immersion' is an interactive word that speaks of holistic engagement. And it also happens to be a Baptist word.

There is no short-cut to getting to know someone well and there is no short cut to encountering the Lord of Scripture without immersing in a text. It takes time, energy, prayer and more time. The classic pattern of *Lectio Divina* has been tried and tested. Practised in the church since the fourth century, adopted by Reformation leaders such as Calvin, used by the Puritans, and enjoying fresh exposure today, it has four stages:

Reading (*lectio*) involves a savouring of the Word. Read the text aloud to yourself, slowly. Taste and see that the Lord is Good.

Meditation (*meditatio*) enters into the text, visualizing, experiencing its words, images, story.

Prayer (*oratio*) consciously holds this reading in a relationship with God.

Contemplation (*contemplatio*) waits with openness for God's word and grace through the text.²

A lively doctrine of Christ present in the congregation and of the Holy Spirit making connections reverses our title to the much

more theologically satisfying: Jesus preaching. Daring to preach Jesus takes us close to Jesus preaching. He remains the proclaimer. As Ritschl puts it:

It is the risen and exalted Lord Himself who in the Holy Spirit is present in the Church; who does not create the Word through the sermon, but the sermon through the Word; and who does not promise to come to a Church which is gathered together because of preaching, but rather makes the Church preach because He is already with it, for He has called it together."³

How much time do you spend prayerfully with the text?

I was speaking to a group of pastors in Iowa. It was dismal, dirty weather. Many of the pastors from small rural churches were finding it tough. I asked them to break into groups of 3 or 4. To take John 20 and to read it aloud together. To drink it in. Not to find new sermon outlines or to boast of past sermon exploits. Some were embarrassed. They weren't used to dealing with Scripture like this. Slowly. Naked Scripture.

Shortly afterwards I received an email. This pastor said that there had been a long-term loss of passion for ministry. "I have been becoming more and more inclined to see people as the problem and have lost passion for all of my ministry, my prayer life, my preaching. Believe me, I'm in the midst of personal darkness and have been there for the better part of a year (at least). I have been drowning in this growing sense of insignificance."

But something happened that was profound - "I was in this room with a fireplace in this lodge in the Iowa woods surrounded by a bunch of preachers and I'm listening to my colleague read John 20. And I'm there, right there at the tomb with

Mary... 'while it was still dark' and she couldn't find Jesus... He wasn't where she expected Him to be (that is lying dead and silent and cold inside the tomb) and the loss of her expectation and equilibrium rendered her panicky, confused, distraught... and He was there all the while... in the dark... with her... waiting to speak her name... 'Mary'. The profound truth is: I'm not alone in my insignificance."

Preachers, by the very opportunity of waiting upon God's word, have a weekly discipline for spiritual and relational vitality. Sermon preparation develops spiritual muscles. Isaiah 40:31 is a favourite text - waiting on the Lord to renew strength with wings as eagles. Preaching Jesus means encountering the Lord of Scripture.

2. Ambassadors for Jesus

'So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.' (2 Corinthians 5:20)

Ambassadors and embassies have a contemporary ring. They speak of dignity, courtesy, power, status and influence. It is delegated power and influence, dependent on the authority of the sending government. Ambassadors are only powerful because they represent someone else. Yet they *do* have power and influence.

Ambassadors for Christ are powerful people. Too often we belittle the task. We forget that its scope is worldwide - that God is about reconciling the world to himself (verse 19). In a mean and petty world where hate and spite threaten to have the last word, there is a greater power - God's healing reconciliation. When I take the human point of view (v 16) and feel like giving up because a task is beyond me,

I must know the task is never beyond Christ. As an ambassador for Christ I represent the King of Kings, constrained by his love (verse 14) to overcome division by his "meekness and gentleness" (1 Cor. 10.1). This day, as I walk among others, I represent him. My lifestyle, actions and words are for him.

Theologically, it is impossible to preach Jesus authentically without being his ambassador. We cannot genuinely preach Jesus without Jesus preaching through us. He is not an object, he is the subject. Every time true preaching takes place Jesus is in the midst and Jesus is at work. Apart from him we can do nothing of eternal value (John 15:5).

Holy Trinity Church on Marylebone Road has an unusual outside memorial on the front wall. A stone pulpit is mounted into the wall with a door behind and an inscription underneath.

This pulpit is erected in memory of
The Revd. William Cadman MA
Canon of Canterbury
Rector of this parish 1859-1891
Who for more than 50 years
In the exercise of his ministry here and
elsewhere
With unfaltering fidelity, unflinching
sympathy and
Unwearied zeal
Preached the gospel of JESUS CHRIST
And adorned the doctrine he taught
By a life of saintliness spent in
communing with his Lord.
Died May 12. 1891.
He being dead yet speaketh.

In 1891 it was acceptable to use such phrases. But today we prefer to be remembered by our quality of leadership, of projects completed, of growth and achievement in numbers. Of avoiding any scandal. Yes, there was a problem with money and she/he did have a nasty temper

when crossed, but there were never any sexual problems. I learned last month of a church where the pastor was found in adultery with a church member. It turned out not to be the first time but a long-term problem. He made tearful confession to his leaders and offered his resignation. They refused to accept. He did not miss one Sunday in a pulpit. In justification the church which adored him said in as many words: 'You know there are so many temptations around, and we are all human even pastors. None of us can cast the first stone. Frankly, today you cannot expect saints.'

Adorned by a life of saintliness? Yet that is the language of Scripture and of Christ's ambassadors. For fear of setting too high a standard we have set no standard at all. Ethics are foundational for preaching and leading. Sometimes preacher/leaders may fail because of inadequate knowledge or skills but most Christian leaders fail because of character deficit. Nothing matters more in conveying God's will for community than character. Personal transformation precedes community transformation.

When a preacher lives in Scripture and walks by Scripture he or she is an ethos giver by the grace of God. Preachers demonstrate ethos qualities as soon as they stand before their people. As Paul Wilson asserts:

Ethos is commonly assessed through what listeners know of the preacher's moral, intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and personal habits, largely through what is learned or signalled of these in the sermon itself. ⁴

The word ethos is also used to describe the way a particular community lives and acts together. We speak of the ethos of a church community. I recall early pieces of advice about ministry "Pastors, be very

careful in ministry. Over time your local church tends to grow like you." "No member of your congregation can go to deeper places than you. Shallow pastors build shallow churches." Such statements oversimplify a complex relationship for there are many complications of perception and different kinds of need within any congregation. But they crystallize the challenge. Communities do tend to grow like their leaders. Contemporary rhetoric similarly speaks of *identity* - a positive identity with the speaker that gives authority.

Leadership occurs through preaching because the person of the preacher impacts community ethos. Preachers are called and gifted by God to declare his life-giving, life-transforming word as gifts for the leading of the church (Ephesians 4.) Preachers lead as the Holy Spirit embodies truth in and through them for the people. Preachers are called to be ambassadors for Christ, which means they represent Christ not just by their words but by their presence. Preaching Jesus means not that we preach about Jesus but we preach with and for Jesus.

Older books emphasized these heady claims. Phillips Brooks for example:

"Truth through Personality is our description of true preaching. The truth must come really through the person, not merely over their lips, nor merely into their understanding.. It must come through their character, their affections, their whole intellectual and moral being."

He contrasts two kinds of preachers. In one the gospel comes over them and "reaches us tinged and flavored with their superficial characteristics, belittled with their littleness". But in the other kind, the gospel comes *through* them and "we receive it impressed and winged with all

that earnestness and strength that there is in them".⁵ Though occasionally recent authors stress ethos (such as Wilson and Loscaizo) its role has been too muted.

Specializing in little thoughts, little ways, little dreams, we have become a little people missing preaching Jesus who sends ambassadors for his big purposes. It boils down to the question I have never stopped asking myself: Is my public spirituality an overflow or a cover-up?

3. Jesus preaches kingdom

Vic Gordon in a book soon to be published⁶ says that there is a consensus among NT scholars that the main theme in the preaching of Jesus was the kingdom of God.

"Most Christians I run into do not know this! I have asked several thousand Christians in teaching settings in churches all over the United States: 'What was the primary subject of Jesus' preaching and teaching?' I am sad to say that I can count on two (or maybe even one!) hands the number who knew. A good number were pastors."

A good question to ask ourselves is: When did I last preach kingdom and use kingdom language? Kingdom talk puts God at the centre of a different reality - the present-future reign of God breaking in, upending structures, heralding new creation where the least are the greatest and enemies are to be loved, and strength is in weakness, last shall be first and love is supreme and moving on to God's future. Kingdom talk generates and sustains creative tension which is at the heart of church renewal. Jesus Christ was the Master of generating and sustaining creative tension. His message is summed up: 'I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God.' (Luke 4.43). Can you find any single example where his

preaching did not cause tension? He called people into kingdom and called them to cross the gap between how things are now and how they might become by the grace of God. Keeping people in kingdom torque, never arriving, always pressing on. Never having loved enough, forgiven enough, lived enough. As Oswald Chambers put it: 'He puts crowns just above our heads and expects us to grow into them'. Never complacent, never bland, never predictable. Luke 4 is the locus of prophetic preaching when Jesus intentionally self-fulfils Isaiah 61. And the rest of the Christian story is living in tension between the now and not yet.

Preacher/leaders have the responsibility of keeping the tension between present reality and God's future promise alive so that the Holy Spirit can transform people and communities. It begins with a preacher's personal vision that is open to God in daily relationship and weekly preaching, which flows through worship into the business and mission life of the church. Jesus' way does not work like anything else. **bmj**

¹ Michael J Quicke, *360-Degree Preaching: Hearing, Speaking and Living the Word*. Baker Academic, 2003

² see M Basil Pennington, *Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying the Scriptures*, Abingdon 1998 for a helpful introduction.

³ Ritschl, Dietrich, *A Theology of Proclamation*, p.121.

⁴ Wilson, Paul Scott, *The Practice of Preaching*, Abingdon, 1999 p.30.

⁵ Brooks, Phillips, *Lectures on Preaching*, p8.

⁶ Gibson, Scott (ed) *Preaching to a Shifting Culture: 12 perspectives on a Communication that Connects*, Baker Books, pub August 2004. Galley's, p.24.

Responding to baptismal requests from children on the threshold of their teenage years - one story/context.

R Mark Janes, Plaistow, East London

Grace was twelve when she asked me if she could be baptised. The request surprised me and I didn't take her very seriously although I gave her a video of some one else's baptism. I told her to ask me again in six months time and thought little more about it.

Time passed, her family were becoming more regular members of our worshipping community, at a time when the age profile of people on Sundays was changing. Last year we reached the point that 40% of our worshipping community was made up of people younger than eighteen years old.

Some while later, Grace now thirteen asked me 'How old do you need to be before you are baptised?' I told her I thought, because of course I hadn't thought; that I would be reluctant to baptise someone who was younger than twelve and she said that she still wanted to be baptised. I told her to ask me again in six months. She said 'That's what you told me six months ago' What could I say? I asked her why she wanted to be baptised and she said 'So that I can make promises I will keep'. I told her that when I had had a chance to think I would talk with her mum.

I was still surprised, but this time I was excited. I mentioned it to another parent called Rebecca who told me that her eleven - year old daughter Ruth had also been asking her about baptism. I was curious as her daughter had just been offered a place at a Roman Catholic secondary school and although Rebecca worshipped with us, Ruth had been christened in a Roman Catholic Church as a baby. I was also cautious because it is not

uncommon for parents to ask about baptism for their children when this reflects the parent's desire much more than the child's. So I asked Ruth. Ruth was very clear that this was her idea and her request.

So there I was with two definite enquiries about baptism, and I was both pleased and excited. For too many years there was a sense among the people of the church that our children would simply grow up and leave us without a living faith in Christ. The expectation of failure leads inevitably to failure. This is not uncommon even in churches with vibrant young people's groups and I believed it was important that this should change, not only because we had a real opportunity to share the good news with this age group but simply because it was our duty.

A while ago we were visited by the Youth Advisor from the London Baptist Association and one of the things he said stuck in my mind. He said that he visits some churches that have state of the art youth provision and yet it's clear that the young people do not really belong and are not really engaged by what's happening. He also visits other churches in which there are all kinds of gaps and yet the young people are included, affirmed and really belong. The church I pastor is closer to the second kind of church. Some of our

gaps shame us and yet there are real signs that we are making progress with the challenge of believing and belonging. These requests for baptism were one such sign.

The communities of Canning Town and Plaistow that we serve are poor urban neighbourhoods yet they also contain some vibrant Black Charismatic churches and a growing population of Black African families who are Christians. This means that a fair number of the young people participate in some kind of worship every week and identify themselves as Christians. Though we have done little to create this environment there is a degree of positive peer pressure working for us that makes it OK if not cool to be in church.

The Memorial church in Plaistow which I serve has deliberately chosen to be a church that is open to people of many cultures and ethnic identities. We are still learning how we can be an inclusive community for people of all ages and some of our learning is painful. Re-imagining church for this age group is hard work for oldies (nearly 40) like me. One way of engaging young people is to create youth churches and though I understand the appeal of this approach we want to persevere at the task of creating a child friendly and inclusive church for everyone. All the same I was not sure what kind of response these baptismal requests would receive because Grace and Ruth were so young. As it turned out the hesitation about their age was far more significant for me than it was for many others. The deacons who were quite relaxed about it when I asked them; at least one of them was baptised when she was fourteen.

I also asked Andrew who is a member of the team ministry in our local parish. He was more cautious. In their parish children can receive their first communion as part

of an initiation course when they are nine or ten but confirmation, which is taken to be a more adult ceremony, is postponed until they are eighteen or more. Of course their children have already been 'baptised' but the point Andrew wanted to convey was that by delaying confirmation they gave the chance for teenagers to explore their identity and rebel before making an adult commitment of faith. He suggested that believers' baptism is essentially an adult commitment of faith.

The need to give people in adolescence the opportunity to rebel and explore their identity before they are expected to make an 'adult' commitment of faith was an important question. I reflected on what Andrew said but I have always resisted the idea that 'believers' baptism should be confused with 'adult' baptism - for if the Grace of God in Jesus Christ is for everyone then the sacrament of baptism cannot be reserved for adults. Of course this is a starting point shared with advocates of 'infant' baptism - but although the Grace of God is the starting point it seems to me that God's Grace in Jesus Christ also calls for a personal response. Therefore, in my view baptism is also about your own confession of faith and your own discipleship as a member of the body of Christ.

My theology of baptism required me to be open to the requests that Grace and Ruth had made but I still had to weigh the other half of what Andrew said for even though Grace and Ruth are bright intelligent girls with lively and enquiring minds they are still children. I was concerned that they could be making a premature confession of Christian faith that would not stand the test of time especially because so much would change in their lives during their teenage years.

To put this in another way I wondered

if people of twelve or thirteen can really give informed consent to a decision that is about the whole of their life when they are going to experience so much change.

Of course any candidate for baptism faces a similar question because change and chance are factors in all our lives. So I decided that all I could do was take their requests at face value and seek to work with the two girls to discern with them if baptism was appropriate for them at this time of their lives.

The other question that Andrew did not pursue with me was the fact that Ruth was christened as a baby. All that I could say, in the face of ecumenical criticism that I was 're-baptising' is that if Ruth is baptised by immersion it will be an opportunity to make her parents' promises her own and experience what she was too young to remember then. Given my misgivings about the practice of infant baptism I would explain it as completing what her christening anticipated. In another context this would be a more urgent question and perhaps the weaker ecumenical relationships in our borough of London make it too easy for me not to explore this question more fully.

I told both the girls that they would have to complete a nine month course in which they would meet with me or another adult every week for about an hour and that in order to conform to our child protection guidelines we would meet in their own homes when one of their parents was about.

Some people have expressed surprise at the length of the course but I was very concerned that the girls should have a strong foundation of Christian understanding and time in which they could absorb what a serious thing baptism was.

At first the two girls met separately because of the difference in their ages and the fact that they hardly knew each other but when they did start to meet together they were unanimous in their desire to go on together. Grace didn't patronise Ruth and Ruth wasn't intimidated by Grace, indeed they stirred up the curiosity and passion to learn that each of them had and bombarded me with questions about suffering, judgement, incarnation, spiritual experience and gender and God.

The course began last September with a temperature - testing quiz about what Christians believe and how Christians behave which invited them to rate their answer by choosing between strongly agree, agree, don't know or not sure, disagree, strongly disagree. Thereafter we have gradually worked our way through the accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection, focussed on prayer and the Holy Spirit and prepared questions to interview some people of their choice.

People have asked if I followed a published syllabus, but I chose not to do this. My reason was two - fold:

- I love talking about the scriptures and faith; and usually find that some one else's Course Notes cramp my style. I hope that I recognise the danger of a purely idiosyncratic syllabus emerging because of this. I have borrowed ideas from all over the place and would enter in my defence that I didn't go to theological college for nothing.
- I wanted the girls to be very confident about their own ability to read, interpret and reflect on scripture for themselves. Therefore we have often simply opened the scriptures and read and reflected together. In the light of the conversation I have then set the readings for the following week together with some questions about the reading I would like them to explore.

Because I wanted them to become confident about their ability to read scripture I have sometimes refused to answer their questions, explaining they must come to their own conclusion because they are accountable for what they believe not for what I believe. In my late teens I set aside much of what I thought I believed because I had never worked it out for myself and no-one had said to me strongly enough that faith was a journey of discovery. I want the girls to be able to discover more without feeling they are abandoning Christ; for 'the Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his word'.

Despite misgivings about evangelical subculture I would still describe myself as an evangelical who believes what I was first taught about the sacrificial death of Jesus at a Scripture Union holiday over 25 years ago. I am keenly aware that while Evangelical churches are very good at welcoming people through their front doors, too many people are leaving through their back doors. This often happens because enquiring minds grow tired of being fed 'truths' that are too simplistic to bear the weight of their life experience and their questions are dismissed. I don't want Grace and Ruth to go through the back door when they are older because they were spoon-fed or stifled now.

My own experience of sharing in a Holy Spirit day as part of an Alpha course has renewed a keen awareness that the spiritual dynamic of Christian faith is essential. Therefore we always share in open prayer together using silence and scripture to remind us that we need to give God time to us speak too. We read some words from Job together and when I explained that Job had been talking too much without listening and that God told him to stop talking and listen, Grace

recognised a word that was intended for her.

Even a friendly church can be a difficult and very 'adult' environment when you are entering your teens, leaving childhood behind but not yet counted as a grown up. It is also hard for churches to make the right judgement calls with people this age and an element of risk is unavoidable whatever you do. One of our risks was inviting the two girls to prepare and lead an act of Sunday worship and invite which adults they chose to take part. Grace talks as if she was running the Grand National and Ruth is a little on the quiet side so they needed a rehearsal but on the day it was fine. They explained why they had chosen their songs, led the prayers and spoke about the readings. A week or so later when they called at the door of Grace's family, Grace's Dad opened the door and when he saw them he said 'here are two pastors'.

It may be interesting to note that when I asked the girls if they thought children who has not been baptised should receive communion they were a little appalled at the idea. As this is a live debate here in Plaistow their voices will count. This is something I shall have to weigh too, because my desire to build an inclusive church has led me in the direction of believing that the Lord's table should be open to children with appropriate instruction even though they may not have been baptised. The girls seem content with the idea that offering bread with honey and grapes as we do, side by side with the bread and wine, overcame the exclusion children might otherwise experience, while keeping the challenge of commitment before them.

In early July their course will come to an end and in late September I shall ask them if they still want to be baptised. If they do it is likely to happen in Easter 2005. This

cooling off period is deliberate and is supposed to give a chance to reflect and to safe guard their decision them from being manipulated by me although they are quite free to talk with anyone else.

At the moment it isn't clear to me what their decision is likely to be. Ruth says she doesn't mind waiting until she is older. Grace is concerned that she doesn't blow her chance to visibly turn over a new leaf or artificially constrain her behaviour because of ideas about what a committed Christian may or may not do, which may change as she grows older. I have found it important to return to the theme of God's grace again and again, explaining on the one hand that his grip on us is much greater than our grip on him and on the other, that he is much less concerned about 'being good' than he is that we love him and are willing to be forgiven and to change. So I wonder what will happen. So much of their life is still ahead of them.

I am really concerned that they build up a core of Christian spirituality and prayer that will sustain them as they grow and experience the unkindness of the world. Ongoing discipleship meetings are part of the post baptismal plan and of course there are some things to do with growing up,

relationships, sex and sexuality that will not be appropriate for me to do with them. This required a conversation with the girls' parents and so with parental consent a friendly woman in membership of the church will do this with them soon.

The support of the girls' parents has been very important all the way through. Both girls have a situation at home where their request for baptism is understood and affirmed without 'call yourself a Christian' guilt about bad behaviour or pressure to say yes or no when a decision has to be made.

I am glad the church has some credibility in their eyes and that both are open about their faith with their friends. Grace said recently how much more serious this has become for her over the last year. In the meanwhile two other girls aged fifteen have asked about baptism and are just beginning their course.

Grace and Ruth are not angels and not even close, but the immediacy with which they embrace life is refreshing. I hope we can give them the opportunity with Christ to build firm foundations that will endure.

dmj

Jesus said, **immerse** people everywhere in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit... Baptism ... is a continuous process... . Too many people are just sprinkled with Christianity – some would say immunised against the real thing; they have a little bit of faith, a few beliefs, some grasp of the story of Jesus. But it can hardly be called immersion. There are some who dip in now and again, when they feel like it – a strange sort of relationship with their God.

David Adam: *The Cry of the Deer*

Practising Baptism in an Ecumenical Context – another story/context.

Paul Ballard, Cardiff.

As an ecumenical project (Baptist/URC) Canton Uniting Church, Cardiff, has had to face issues raised by recognising two modes of baptism and two different approaches to baptismal discipline. Rather than simply allow the contrasting views to sit uneasily side by side to be faced as need arises, it was decided that, from the beginning, attempts should be made to explore a common understanding, though one that would also emerge more clearly with time and experience.

This was assisted by the fact that the original Baptist congregation (Llandaff Road) had already been working on the consequences for baptismal practice of ecumenical commitment as one of the Covenanting Baptist Churches in Wales. It was, therefore, general practice on one hand to stress the need for baptism rather than ignore it in practicing 'open membership' whether by immersion or not; but on the other hand not to re-baptise those coming from other traditions, except where there were good, strong pastoral reasons. Thus it was, on joining, not so difficult to appreciate the URC discipline of not allowing re-baptism.

Such a stance could be maintained on the theological understanding of the Christian life as a journey, marked by different stages of initiation. Thus the two standard models of baptism stand in parallel. Each has an initial welcome into the family of faith and the promise of support and nurture. Each has a point of decision and commitment when the believer takes up responsibility within the 'household of God'. Nor is this the end. It is but a stage on the pilgrimage of life. It is possible to see other stages on this, often tortuous and broken, pathway that need to be marked and celebrated. The act of baptism would be inappropriate at each and every spiritual high point.

This frees us to see the act of baptism both as unique, when God sacramentally lays his hand on us, and as part of the accompanying grace of God. Thus the stress is on the primacy of God in all our lives, even when we are unaware or careless. Baptism is a declaratory act in which we are caught up and respond appropriately. God draws us closer to himself, declares the eternal covenant and builds up the Church in the cosmic drama of salvation.

The practical process of working this out can be illustrated by two Easter baptisms.

The first, a year or so ago, was an occasion for both believers' baptism and confirmation or admittance to membership of those already baptised. Given the moving drama of believers' baptism it was difficult to put equal emphasis on the confirmation. Symbolically both the pool and the font were open. Liturgically words and gestures tried to stress the symbiotic nature of the events of the occasion.

More interestingly, perhaps, this Easter the church responded to a request from a family for their children, who are members of the Junior Church, to be baptised. As it is normal to accept a request for baptism made seriously, and this was a considered request, this was seen, at one level merely as an

extension of that practice. But it was also very different as the children were able to appreciate something of what was going on; albeit they were (willingly) being sponsored.

In these circumstances it was thought right to try to embody our understanding of the Gospel for this occasion. The standard liturgies and other sources were consulted but with really little help as this has not been taken up as a particular problem. Yet it is clear that, for example in Anglicanism, families can join the Church, including growing children. It must be similar to the experience of the New Testament churches where 'households' were baptised, presumably including slaves as well as children. This is compounded by the widespread practice of including children in communion, not least among Nonconformity.

On this occasion the baptism was embedded in the Easter liturgy after the proclamation of the Word, as follows:

Theme: Taking hold of Christ for the journey of life.

Welcome to the baptismal party.

Declaration on baptism and the welcome to children.

Reading: Luke 18.16-17.

Responses: When Jesus was baptised in the waters of Jordan, the Spirit of God came upon him. His baptism was completed through his dying and rising again. Our baptism is a sign of our dying and rising again to new life in Christ. In baptism God puts his seal of love upon us and draws us to himself. It is the gift of God through his Holy Spirit, whereby he pledges himself to us and covenants himself to be with us wherever life may lead.

*Fear not, I have redeemed you.
I call you by name. You are mine.*

In baptism we wear the sign of Christ,

pledging ourselves to his service and putting ourselves under his care. We bind to ourselves his love and care so that we may, by his grace, walk in his way.

*When you pass through the floods
I shall be with you.*

*When you pass through rivers
They will not overwhelm you.*

In baptism we are joined to the fellowship of God's people, our brothers and sisters in pilgrimage. Through them we find support and guidance. With them we try to walk in Christ's way.

*Justified by his grace,
We might, in hope, become heirs to
eternal life.*

The Affirmations:

To the parents and sponsors

You have brought X and Y to baptism knowing that Jesus died and rose again for them and trusting that God hears and answers prayer. You want them to be sealed with the sign of Christ in the hope and desire that they will find grace, mercy and peace in the love of God as revealed in Christ and that they may find in Christ their true salvation.

As they grow up they will need every support to explore and discover the Christian life.

Do you affirm your trust in God?

We do.

Will you seek God's grace and help in guiding them and helping them as they set out on the path of life and find their own faith in God.

We will.

To the children

X and Y, your mother and father have brought you to this solemn moment when you are to be baptised and thereby brought into the body of Christ. We hope that this will indeed be something you will remember and to which you can turn for

inspiration and strength throughout your life in all its joys and sorrows. Will you try to remember that you have been baptised and that God loves and cares for you and seek to love him and serve him in return?

We will.

To the congregation

As part of the Church of Christ, we all have a duty to support X and Y and their family as they join us in the pilgrimage of faith. They will need help and encouragement, by prayer, in fellowship and through example, as they join us in worship, prayer and service, finding God's presence and following Christ in their lives. Will you now, and in the future, pledge your Christian friendship to X and Y and their family?

We will.

Prayer

Living God, your Son, Jesus Christ, for our sake and our salvation, went through the waters of baptism and, in the service of your kingdom, trod the ways of Palestine,

healing the sick, freeing the burdened and bringing joy and dignity to the outcast, giving himself utterly in your service that it took him to the cross. But your Spirit was within him, comforting and strengthening, never absent; so that at the last death could not hold its prey, but you brought him from the dead, our living Lord.

Bless now this gift of water, whereby all life is kept in being. May it become for us, in this act of baptism, the living symbol of that gift of life which is your presence, so that we may be united with Christ in his death and risen with him in newness of life.

Baptism.

Lighting of their own candle from the Easter candle.

Presentation of commemorative certificates etc

Intercession for the baptisands, the family, the Pilgrim People of God.

Hymn: I bind unto myself this day. **bmj**

Something to belong to! In answer to that innately human cry there are offered the spacious arms of the Body of Christ. Immediately however, so splendidly simply a proposition demands qualification. The Church stands between creation and consummation serving the world, subserving the Kingdom. Only in partial and provisional sense is the congregation the place of the christian's 'belonging'. It is by their joint participation in the Holy Spirit that christian disciples find communion and the belonging which it imparts. Yet precisely by the Holy Spirit they are stretched between the created world of our human living and the consummated world of divine promise. They are planted in the tension and overlap of the old and the new, and cannot retreat from either to take refuge in any third or insulated zone. They are awarded dual citizenship and summoned to its exercise. Since it is the faithfulness of God alone that provides, sustains and guarantees their fundamental belonging, the corresponding virtue which is demanded of them is faith. By faith, they are to know themselves 'at home'. It is an agonisingly difficult demand. Pastoral theology is ever burdened with the task of its effective delineation, so that christian formation may shape christian obedience.

Neville Clark *Pastoral Care in Context*: Vision of God and Service of God.
Kevin Mayhew 1992

Baptists and the Present Ecumenical Challenge.

A further reflection by Paul Ballard.

The Assembly in Cardiff heard of the continuing conversations with the Independent Methodists, a small connexion of some ninety churches, mainly found in the north of England. This is welcome good news. Any move to reduce the division in Christ's people is to be welcomed. It was, however, pointed out that, while believers' baptism is widely practised among them, infant baptism is also practised, as would be expected in a Methodist tradition. It was not made clear, however, how this issue was being addressed. Nor was any public discussion called for. But it could mean, in principle, that both modes of baptism could be present among churches in membership with BUGB. If so then the moves are doubly to be welcomed. It would also, however, raise at least two issues that have largely been ignored but which are real in this age of pragmatic ecumenism.

There is, of course, the matter of baptism itself. The present traditional response to the tension of accommodating variety has been 'open membership', allowing Christians of different traditions to join a Baptist congregation without, effectively, raising the problem. Unfortunately this has often gone hand in hand with the individualisation of the faith, downplaying the significance of baptism, making it an optional, personal decision of witness instead of the gateway into the Church and incorporation into the body of Christ. As a result Baptist churches in this country (but not so across the world) are almost the only ones in which baptism is not required. Parallel to this is the interpretation frequently given to the 'open table' as a personal response instead of an invitation to members of the household of faith. We are thus left with a very low ecclesiology, interpreting the 'gathered community' as the coming together of individuals rather than the company of the called. Incidentally, in this important discussion of sacramental theology the Methodist tradition would bring to it the concept of 'the converting ordinance' which would fit in with an open table but support infant baptism!

It would be opportune, therefore, as

part of this process of reconciliation, to renew acquaintance with the perspectives and challenges that engagement with the Faith and Order Movement has brought over the past many decades. This is, in relation to our present interest, caught most significantly in the 'Lima' document, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (World Council of Churches 1982), the repercussions of which are still with us. It tried to draw together a basis for discussion of the three outstanding areas of disunity in Church practice, catching the richness of our different histories while being faithful to the Gospel. British Baptists have made an honourable and lively contribution to this process. There is a long way, perhaps, to go but it is also imperative that we, as a denomination, should be willing to listen and learn and to change, as well as to give.

There have been situations where the baptismal barrier has been overcome. On the world stage this has happened most notably in the Church of North India. Nearer to home, the accession of the Churches of Christ to the United Reformed Church means that that Church acknowledges both forms of baptism. But the discipline is different. Baptism is required for church membership but may

only be undergone once. Infant baptism is brought to completion in reception/confirmation; but to those not yet baptised it is administered as the centre of reception. In this way the dominical command is upheld and the integrity of other traditions respected. As an aside it is worth noting that baptism was not the primary barrier for the coming together of those two churches. The Churches of Christ, though baptistic, found a home in the Presbyterian ecclesiology of the URC rather than with the Congregationalism of the Baptists. Is the converse true of the Independent Methodists?

Nor has this situation been absent from our own tradition. There have, since the seventeenth century, been a few but significant 'union' churches. And this situation is growing as Baptists are increasingly finding themselves collaborating with Anglicans and other Free Churches in Local Ecumenical Projects. As such congregations settle down and consolidate the former assumptions and customs recede into the past and a new tradition emerges moulded by local experience and opportunities. There are 'rules of engagement' for Baptists in such situations but one suspects that the immediate needs and communal expectations often override such considerations. There is now a wealth of experience and wisdom available that it is surely worth looking at what has been learned out of practical pastoral experience. We may be in for a surprise!

This brings us to the second issue that is raised by the conversations with the Independent Methodists. It was at the Nottingham Conference of the British Council of Churches (1974) that local ecumenism was put firmly on the agenda. There has, as we have already noted, been an exponential growth in such projects from the amalgamation of Milton Keynes to the achievement of village churches. However

the consequences of this process has not really been taken on board. Effectively the denominational structures have remained intact. Every effort to try to provide an ecumenical structure to give recognition to this new phenomenon, such as Sponsoring Bodies, has simply resulted in another, usually ineffectual, layer of administration. Centrally, both the Ecumenical Instruments and the denominations need to ask afresh what it means to work with and for local congregations for whom such traditional alliances are increasingly irrelevant. Nor has this been helped by the demise of the British Council of Churches in 1990, which at least had some ability to act pro-actively, to be replaced by Churches Together which only responds to the behest of the churches.

Meanwhile the local church has to work within two or more denominational networks. At the same time we are being constantly encouraged to remain the church, to take on board post-modern patterns of witness and service and worship. But many of the ecumenical projects have in their own way been trying to do exactly that. As the scribe described by Jesus, they have brought treasures old and new, in liturgy, proclamation and community activity, and brought them into the Kingdom. Greater recognition ought to be given to the struggles and successes of those who have served the ecumenical calling over many years. There is a resource here that is for the whole Church.

The ecumenical vision will not disappear: 'that they all may be one, ... that the world might believe.' (John 17.21) It is not enough to have a loose cooperative of independent churches; the aim, however long it may be in coming, is the eschatological vision of diversity in the bond of unity, when, as the New Delhi definition put it, 'all in each place' can share in the same Eucharist and share the same ministry and witness in word and deed to the common faith. **bmj**

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A STITCH IN TIME

One of my Church surveyors recently related a sad story to me of a small, early Victorian chapel in a somewhat rural and remote area he had come across during his surveying travels.

Over ten years ago, when there were more members attending the chapel, a structural survey had revealed that works needed doing to the fabric to deal with a damp ingress problem - partly due to defective guttering and down-pipes and partly due to a failed lead flashing. The cost of putting it right was about £3,000. Admittedly a lot of money to a small church, but at that time still possibly affordable with some extra help and effort.

This work had been put off for year after year until it had been overlooked entirely and the damp patches and peeling plaster on the internal walls accepted as the status quo.

Unfortunately, the continuing ingress of water into the structure had by now penetrated into the gallery timbers and wall plates supporting the main roof. Beetle infestation was then noticed in the roof about three years ago, and a further survey was carried out.

The results of the survey made for pretty shocking reading. The roof and gallery timbers were now in a seriously dangerous condition and the chapel would have to close for reasons of safety. The church is now closed and redundant, with no money available for repairs and with no likelihood of sale.

This is rather an extreme case, but illustrates that if you notice a problem with the fabric which needs repair, putting it off is only going to increase the costs of more extensive work which ultimately will have to be dealt with.

Perhaps In your own Church, you have noticed a patch of grass or other vegetation peeping over the roof guttering, but have not got round to call in a builder with long ladders to deal with the matter. All this time, the rain water may not be draining away as it should but is going somewhere else - ultimately with probable costly consequences.

Similar problems arise if a down-pipe is cracked but not noticed. Have you a damp patch on the wall behind a down-pipe? Maybe the air bricks at the bottom of the main walls are covered with rubbish or undergrowth? The flooring timbers nearby will ultimately suffer and repairs will be costly.

Doing simple repairs and maintenance immediately, once a problem is identified, can save large amounts of money and trouble later.

To help keep on top of matters like this, every Church should have a system of regular buildings' inspection and keep a "Property Log". Someone should walk around every month or so - looking for "trouble" - and deal with it!

These sorts of problems will never go away by themselves. Even if resources are small try and put matters right before inaction may precipitate something far worse.

Yours Sincerely

Alf Green ACII

(Assistant General Manager)

One Wedding and a hundred Funerals.

John Elliston, Darlington

As a Baptist minister, in the year 2003, I conducted just one wedding. As a registrar of births, death and marriages, my wife conducted well over a hundred, fifty percent of which were "packages" offered by large hotels. Although some couples have always chosen the Register Office as a venue for their marriage, there was a time not that long ago when the statistics for marriages conducted by officers of the church and those conducted by registrars would have told a very different story. The reasons for this change are complex; the ongoing decline in church attendance, the freeing up of legislation relating to premises licensed to be used for the conduct of marriage; the desire of couples to develop their own interpretative context for the event, and so on. However, alongside all of these is the increasingly aggressive marketing strategy of the large hotels and the Registration Service to capture the very lucrative public ceremony market.

The Registration Service in England and Wales is no longer simply the constitutionally appointed body that oversees the registration of births, marriages and deaths; it is increasingly seen as a potential source of revenue generation for hard pressed local authorities, and as such, is concerned with maximising its market share. Its only real competitor is the Church. With the exception of marriages conducted in church premises under the auspices of an authorised person, every marriage currently requires the presence of a registrar to both register the marriage and to ensure that the marriage contract has been entered into in accordance with the law. Because there are statutory requirements in regard to the words of contract and in regard to the content of the ceremony, in practice, registrars work in pairs, one acting as the celebrant and the other acting as registrar. It is the *celebrant* who is crucial to the income stream for the Registration Service, and it is therefore the quality of the "celebration" that is promoted, whether it is to take place within the local authority marriage room or in remote premises such as a hotel. A marriage in a hotel involving the presence of both a registrar and a celebrant costs the couple around £430. To put that in

context, for the last wedding I conducted I charged £150, and that included the use of the building, the organist, my own fee, and additional caretaking.

The key term in the previous paragraph is *celebrant*, because it is the celebratory side of the Registration Service that is being expanded into areas that, unlike marriage, have no implied law of contract, i.e., naming ceremonies, the re-dedication of marriage vows, and the conduct of funerals. Until recently, these, like marriage, were commonly seen as the preserve of the church, but the market place is changing. Training organisations are growing up to meet the demand for celebrants, with the result that increasing numbers of registrars are "qualified" (in the sense that they have demonstrated their competence in public speaking and in the practicalities of ceremony preparation) to officiate at the various rites of passage that I have already mentioned. Within a few years, therefore, I can envisage the statistics relating to marriage with which I began this article being replicated in respect of the other areas of "celebration" too. There are already areas of the country where nearly fifty percent of funerals are conducted by civil celebrants. Does it matter? Should we be resisting the

inevitable marginalisation of our own skills as celebrants, or just go with the flow? Are there deeper issues, deeper losses, involved than the church's own revenue stream?

It is arguable, since people will always have a choice, that what ministers will be left with are those people who, as a conscious matter of faith, want a God/church centred celebration. Celebratory services of worship will, as a result, have a guaranteed integrity, both from the minister's perspective and from the perspective of those that are on the receiving end of his or her offices; the question of hypocrisy (white dresses, and the proclamation of a rogue's sanctity in a eulogy) will be banished forever. This view has been aired in recent letters in the Baptist Times, but it is not a view that should be adopted uncritically, because it says things about the nature of ministry and mission (and thus God) which some would consider to be at odds with the universality of the faith proclaimed. It has the immediate effect, for example, of reducing the concept of a God in whom all things exist to little more than a local tribal deity standing alongside a range of other conceptual constructs.

Far from being resigned to occupying its own niche, the all encompassing nature of its theocentric world view suggest that the church should be answering the need for ceremony at every point on the human journey and wherever it arises. The fact that vast numbers of people are looking elsewhere is not because the truths underlying its offices have become irrelevant to a "secular" worldview, but that the church has failed to express meaningfully and with integrity a spirituality that meets people where they are; it is out of touch. The commonly felt desire to celebrate love, for example, which is itself an expression of a basic spiritual need, has been placed into a

straight-jacket by the church, so that if one happens to be a single mother, or a divorcee, or God forbid, gay or lesbian, one runs the risk that the church will say "no", that one's love will remain uncelebrated, and, by implication, one's personhood will be diminished. The Registration Service does not discriminate in this way. When, however, the church succeeds in answering the need, the theocentric context for celebration locates that love within the diversity, depth and profundity of God's own love, and so affirms love and lover absolutely.

An essential difference between the offices of the church and the ceremonies offered by the Registration Service lies in the sphere of public and private meaning. While both types of celebration are in their outward form public, the interpretative framework for the latter is markedly private. Within the constraints of law, couples, for example, are beginning to write their own vows. This enhances the private and personal meaning of the rite, but diminishes its communal significance; those who witness it are on the outside, and excluded from, what is happening between the two people involved. In contrast, in the church's understanding of marriage it is the communal aspect that is central - which is why church members will often attend the weddings of total strangers. Marriage in the church is not just a sharing of selves, but a sharing of selves as part of the common life of the community. This is explicitly affirmed in the marriage service. Similar observations can be made in regard to all rites of passage. In a funeral, for example, it is not just those closest to the death that have to be helped to come to terms with loss, but the community as a whole.

The communal meaning of the rite of passage within the offices of the church ultimately derives from theological reflection upon the nature of God. God is

the primary context for all life. God is the God of all things, the creator of heaven and earth, and the reality in which we live, move and have our being. Every rite of passage that the church celebrates is therefore, by definition, part of a greater story that has its origin at the beginning of all things and will end in the end of all things. This fact is acknowledged by the celebration of these rites, not in isolation, but within the ongoing worship of the church. A rite of passage is therefore, pictorially conceived, rather like an iceberg, a relatively small visible aspect that is underpinned by something far greater; it is to this greater story that, in its celebration, the church both refers and bears witness, and in which all, believer and unbeliever, are included.

Placing a rite of passage within the greater story referred to above enables the minister to say something about the significance of the event (birth, marriage and death) that a civil celebrant cannot say (and is ill-equipped to say), and which is far more than the words "religion" or "religious language" convey. From it, for example, there flows an understanding of what it means to be human (the unity of body mind and spirit), an understanding that human maturity comes through community and not in isolation, and that love and relationship is the medium in which humanity is most fulfilled. Some of this is conveyed through the words he or she uses, and some of it is conveyed symbolically through the collective understanding of the minister's function and the tradition in which the minister stands.

As celebrants, and before ever a word is uttered, ministers carry with them the symbolic weight of their calling. This gives their words (and so the rite) an authority beyond that of the more pragmatically shaped words of registrars, but more importantly, it begins to build a bridge

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between the outer world of the ceremony and the inner world of the human spirit. It is a calling that we, as ministers, should bear with pride – and not only in the churches we serve, but beyond. It is proposed that at some point in the near future the system that is currently based upon buildings registered for the conduct of marriages will become a system based upon people who are authorised to conduct marriage ceremonies. A minister who is so authorised will, in principle, be able to officiate at a wedding wherever it is deemed appropriate.

The celebration of rites of passage, conducted well, are a powerful vehicle for affirming the spiritual dimension of life, for opening people's spiritual horizons, and for locating life events into the sphere of the greater and more eternal. It is therefore a pulpit we should not surrender lightly, whether it is located in a church or a hotel lounge. That may mean, however, raising our game. Sadly, many ministers are complacent in their preparation of services, particularly funerals, because they do so many! That complacency will be our downfall, because increasingly the celebrant's reputation is becoming a factor in the recommendations made by undertakers when they meet with the bereaved. (Civil celebrants are actively encouraged to build relationships with undertakers as partners in responding to people's need for ceremony, because undertakers exert considerable influence over the proceedings when a death occurs). Celebrations must connect and be meaningful to the people present, not just be recycled with the names changed to suit again and again. But to play the role of *celebrant* alone is not enough for the minister, because for him or her the single celebration is but a moment in God's embrace of humanity. Whether a minister is standing before a couple and marrying them, naming a child, or marking a death, he or she does so, not in the role of

celebrant (mouthing particular words), but as Christ. He or she is not there merely to speak, but in God's name to love people from the cradle to the grave, irrespective of their beliefs. What she or he will offer therefore, incredibly simple to express while being impossible to fulfil, is the incarnational God, weeping with those who weep, laughing with those who laugh.

To conclude, the Church has considerable expertise in celebrating rites of passage, but the days when it is the church that people call upon to provide a context for celebrations are rapidly receding. Civil celebrants are answering at a practical level (and so, in fact, failing to truly answer) the inner, spiritual, needs within people to mark their life events, while the church, which has refined its understanding of ceremony over centuries, and which welds that understanding to a

model of full humanity, is being disregarded. I believe, however, that as ministers we have the potential to bring a unique quality and depth to all rites of passage, quite independently of whether those who gather to celebrate through our offices are Christian, and that we should actively promote ourselves in what has become a celebration market place. How we achieve market presence is a very practical challenge, though there is still everything to gain; a survey of couples married by the registration service indicated that 74% would have liked a religious celebrant in a location other than a church. But perhaps, before we even begin to address practicalities, we need to face squarely the question that faces every competing stall-holder, "What is distinctive about our celebratory acts that set them apart from the rest?" No stock answers please. **bmj**

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Revelation for living, not resource for escaping.

Simon Woodman, Counterslip, Bristol, explores John's vision and challenge for our contemporary age.

For most of us, Revelation is a book which is either largely ignored, or it is the object of such fanatical study and fanciful interpretation that it passes from the realm of useful scripture into the realm of fantasy and speculation. Much literature has been published in recent years on its interpretation – some of which is scholarly and technical, and some of which is populist and accessible. The problem, it seems to me, is that the literature written with an eye on “the person in the pew” comes predominantly from the fanatical and fanciful stable, whereas the literature which is sensible and useful tends to be written for scholars and academics. What I am hoping to do in this article is to try in a small way to begin to bridge this gap.

My basic conviction in reading Revelation is that here is a book which is trying to help us understand our world differently. I also believe that everything John writes must have made perfect sense to the people for whom it was first written. This isn't some bizarre vision generated by too many local mushrooms (as some have suggested) which enables the reader to escape from reality into some dream world where we can all live happily ever after!

John has no time at all for those who would seek to escape from this world. And I think he would be horrified if he thought that there were those who were treating his writings as the kind of escapist literature which has no bearing on the present lived reality. John's entire purpose in writing is not to provide escapism, but rather to provide a true dose of spiritual reality. In this article, I would like us to consider one of the more vivid passages from John's vision.

Revelation 17.1-6 (New Revised Standard Version)

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the judgment of the

great whore who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk.” So he carried me away in the spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: “*Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations.*” And I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus.

Let me introduce you to four women and a beast: Three of the women are beautiful, noble, pure and virginal. The other woman and the beast, we will come to shortly...

The women are not real; rather they are symbolic representations of a greater reality. The first woman is Britannia, the noble and beautiful warrior queen who symbolised the British Empire in its

heyday. The image of Britannia, the woman wearing a helmet and carrying a shield and trident, is a symbol that blends the concepts of empire, militarism and economics. The second woman is the Lady Liberty, whose most famous representation is the Statue of Liberty in America. She symbolises the nobility and purity of the American Empire, the land of the free, the land of liberty and justice.

The third woman is much older, but just as beautiful, and she dates from Roman times. In temples and on street corners throughout the Roman empire there would have been statues of the goddess Roma. She was depicted as a beautiful, pure woman, and presented a stunning personification of the civilisation of Rome.¹ She was often carved holding an elaborate wine cup in her hands, and the wine it contained was symbolic of the richness and glory of being part of the Roman Empire.

The experience of many who lived in the Roman empire was that Roma and all that she stood for was a positive image, representing all that was good and worthy of praise in their citizenship. The majority of the citizens of Rome enjoyed the benefits of her existence, and drank deeply from the wine-cup in her hands. It is this image which John had in mind when he was writing to the churches of Asia Minor in the letter of Revelation. He pictures in his mind the goddess Roma, the pure, virginal, beautiful, lovely symbol of the Roman civilisation. But the way John sees her, she is a Roman prostitute: a sleazy whore, a tart, a slut, a spreader of disease, and a corruptor of any who climb into her bed. And she isn't fussy; she will share her bed with anyone who is interested, corrupting all who buy into her. She is inviting everyone from the kings of the earth, to the common people of Rome, to participate in her pleasures and to buy into her corruption.

By giving those churches in Asia Minor this alternative picture of the goddess Roma, John is doing what he does all the way through his visionary work of Revelation: He is giving his readers the heavenly perspective on their earthly situation. He is showing them their contemporary context as heaven sees it, rather than as they see it, and in so doing he is preparing and equipping them to live as Christians in the midst of an anti-Christian world.

The temptation for those living under the thrall of Rome was to buy into its ideology, to believe its propaganda, to unquestioningly accept its benefits, and to not ask anything about the costs involved. Or, to put it another way, the temptation for those living in close proximity to Roma was to buy into her seductive luxuries, and to not question the cost.

In his re-working of the goddess Roma as the great whore, John turns this temptation on its head, because the way John sees her she symbolises the economic structure of the Roman empire.² Instead of being a beneficial and noble structure symbolised by a noble and beautiful woman, he sees Roman economics as a corrupt and corrupting system symbolised by a prostitute.

By using this imagery John is seeking to allow his readers to perceive something of Rome's true character. He is showing them the moral corruption which lies behind the beautiful and attractive exterior, and in giving his readers this insight he is presenting them with a stark choice: They either buy into Rome's ideology, accepting the view of the empire promoted by Roman propaganda and symbolised by the goddess Roma; or they see Rome from the perspective of heaven and understand it for the corrupt institution it really is.

So what of the image of the scarlet

beast with seven heads? For John, the beast symbolises the corrupt and violent military and political power of Imperial Rome, the city of seven hills.³ He portrays Rome as a system of violent oppression, founded on conquest and perpetuated by a system of slavery. The way John sees it, the economic prosperity signified by the statues of Roma and enjoyed by the citizens of Rome, is bought at the expense of other people's oppression and poverty. The whore is pictured *riding* the beast – with all the sexual connotations that this phrase brings with it. They are intimately related, in bed together, soul-mates in corruption.

Through this image, John is providing his readers with a searing political and economic critique of the mighty empire of Rome. The city of Rome, when it is seen from heaven's perspective, becomes Babylon – the ancient enemy of God's people. The military might and political power of Rome is seen as a terrifying beast, destroying and oppressing all who do not accept its ideology. The economic success of Rome is seen as a common whore, corrupting all those who buy into her system, and this economic success exists only because of the military might that sustains it. The prosperity of Rome is bought at the expense of others, and the corrupting influence of that prosperity is achieved and maintained by the imperial armies.

But John knows that not everyone can see Rome the way he can. Not everyone sees Babylon, and the beast, and the whore – they still see Rome as Rome wants to be seen: Pure, noble, good, and righteous. Although John can see the empire as a system of tyranny, oppression, and exploitation, he is entirely aware that it was not resisted or opposed by most of its subjects. The way John sees it, the citizens of Rome have climbed into bed with the whore. They are enjoying their high standards of living, they are enjoying

the economic prosperity of their time, and they are not seeing that it is corrupt and corrupting because it is prosperity bought at the cost of others' oppression.

The citizens of Rome are drinking deeply from the golden cup that the Goddess Roma holds out to them from an outstretched arm, and they do not realise that they are actually drinking from a poisoned chalice. Rome is offering them participation in the Pax Romana: The gift of peace, security, and prosperity that the Roman empire gave to those who accepted her ideology. The peace of Rome was her gift to the world, and the world must either take the gift or pay the price.⁴ Those drinking from the golden cup, both the kings of the earth and the citizens of Rome, had become too stupefied on the wine of Rome's success to notice the price which that success was demanding. John shows his readers that the wine of Roman rule was offered in a cup whose exterior may have been golden but whose interior was actually poison. The goddess Roma may appear beautiful and attractive, but she is nothing more than a corrupting whore who is in bed with the beast of political and military oppression.

So what is John's advice to those in his churches? We see it in 18:4 where he says to his congregations "Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins" (NRSV) John sees that the people of his churches are climbing into bed with the whore and buying her services for their own pleasure, and that they are blind to the cost their prosperity is demanding

John sees the people of his churches unthinkingly accepting the economic prosperity of Rome without giving a passing thought to those who were living in oppression and misery to maintain their high standard of living. So John says to these early Christians that they must come out. They must withdraw. They must leave

the bed of the prostitute. They are to resist participating in the political and military machine which oppresses and destroys. They are to withdraw from the economic systems which corrupt and defile. John is here exposing the lies of the empire for what they are, so that his congregations can see their world as heaven sees it, and can then act accordingly. He is giving them heaven's perspective on their earthly situation, so they can identify the beast of political and military oppression and spot the whore of economic corruption. He is urging his congregations to act on this knowledge and resist the beast and come out from the prostitute.

Well, what about today? Is the prostitute dead and gone? Is the beast banished? Is corrupt economics which leads to oppression a thing of the past?

I wrote to my bank a while back, and asked them to provide me with an assurance that my money would not be invested in the arms trade, or in companies who exploited the poor of the world in the interests of pursuing their own profits, or in companies who exploit the planet and our natural resources. I was told that I could be given no such assurance because the bank was answerable not to me, its customer, but to its shareholders, and that their interest was in maximising profits, not in providing a fair wage for people, or in preserving the environment, or in preventing war. So I have moved my bank to one which has a clear ethical policy. I chose to withdraw from the corrupt economics at that point.

I now pay slightly more for my electricity because I am on a green policy which guarantees that the electricity I use in my house has come from renewable energy sources. And before you go writing me off as a "green" nut, the increasing numbers of famines which result in millions of people dying are significantly

contributed to by global warming, something caused in turn largely by the indiscriminate burning of fossil fuels in the western world. Millions die in order that we can have electricity when we want it. Millions live in poverty in order that the shareholders of our financial institutions can maximise their profits. Millions cannot afford to feed their children so that we can buy our coffee at the cheapest price... Yet still we buy our electricity from the cheapest supplier, still we bank with the big 4, and still we buy the same goods we have always bought.

I think the whore is alive and well and living in England, and I think we willingly climb into her bed and enjoy the pleasures she offers us while leaving others to count the cost.

The economic systems of the modern west bear frightening similarities to those of Rome about which John is so scathing. We in the west drink the cup of our economic prosperity as we live in relative security under the military protection of the Pax Americana, or the Pax Britannia. And all the while we enjoy our freedom to oppress those whose existence is defined by their working to perpetuate our prosperity.

John's vision and challenge is, I think, as relevant today as it ever was.

¹ Bauckham 1993b, 17-18

² Bauckham 1993b, 36

³ Bauckham 1993b, 35

⁴ Bauckham 1993b, 36

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Ethical Consumer Magazine
<http://www.ethicalconsumer.org>,
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 M15 5RF Tel. 0161 226 2929

Renewable energy suppliers -
<http://www.sweb.co.uk/show/Page.do?name=home.products.green.til>
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<http://www.ecotricity.co.uk> or
 phone 01453 756 111

Internet portal sponsored by Christian Aid, with
 information on ethical issues -
<http://www.fish.co.uk>

Links to further resources:

The Co-op Bank
<http://www.co-operativebank.co.uk>,
 16 St Stephen's Street, Bristol

Smile Internet Bank <http://www.smile.co.uk>

Triodos Bank <http://www.triodos.co.uk>,
 Freepost BS9292 Bristol BS8 3ZZ
 Tel. 0117 973 9339

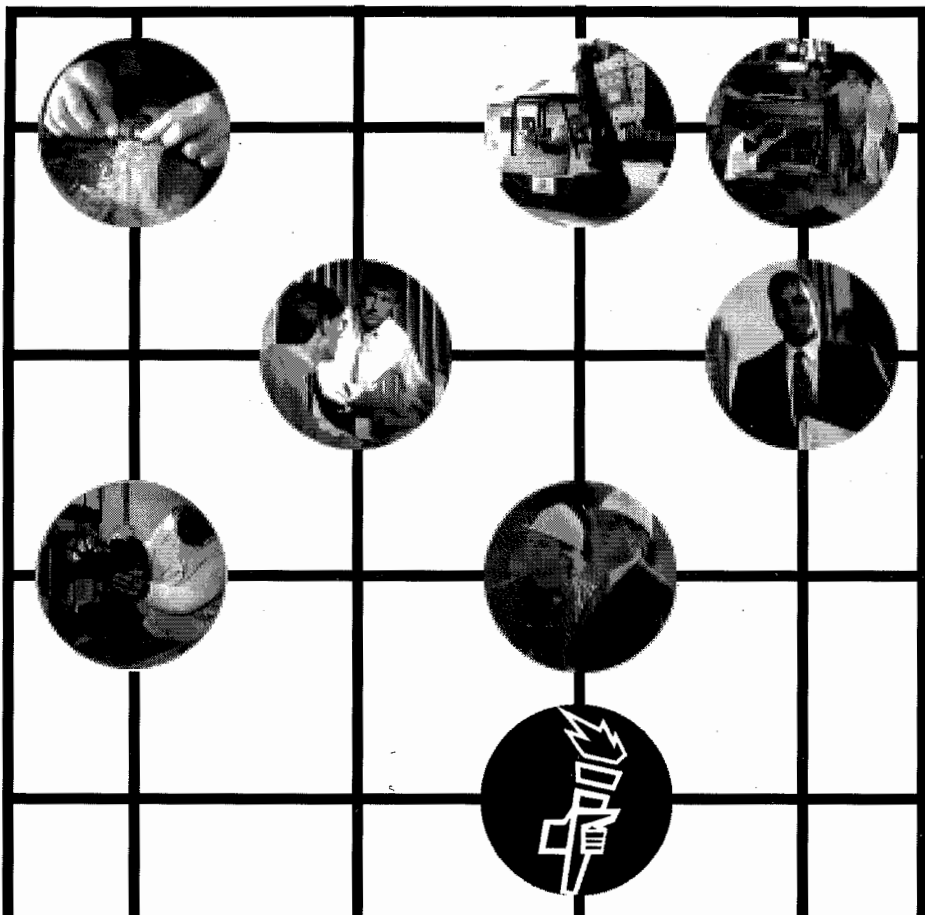
You mark us with your water,
 You scar us with your name,
 You brand us with your vision,
 and we ponder our baptism: your water, your name, your vision.

While we ponder, we are otherwise branded.

Our imagination is consumed by other brands,
 - winning with Nike,
 - pausing with Coca-Cola
 - knowing and controlling with Microsoft.

Re-brand us,
 transform our minds,
 renew our imagination.
 that we may be more fully who we are marked
 and hoped to be.

from Walter Brueggemann, *Prayer at a baptism class* ([Awed to heaven, Rooted in Earth](#) Fortress 2003)



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International Report

By Rev. Michael J. Cleaves

'COME TO BIRMINGHAM, U.K. in 2005!' is the message of the Baptist Ministers' Fellowship (BMF) following the meeting on 26th May 2004 of the BMF Committee.

Attending my first meeting as International Secretary, I was very encouraged by the enthusiasm expressed for encouraging all ministers to attend the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) Centenary Congress next year. As well as committing itself to contributing to the BWA Scholarship Fund to assist participation, the BMF has already arranged a RECEPTION AT THE CONGRESS to welcome all ministers and to share fellowship. It will take place during the 'Pastors' Stream' events, on FRIDAY 30TH JULY 2005 at 5:30pm at the INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE CENTRE.

So, consider yourself invited! You will not need to book or obtain tickets – just turn up. We are especially keen to welcome international guests – so come, and spread the word!

I am very grateful for the messages I have received over the past few months, and I take this opportunity to share some of them with you. You may recognise some names, others will be new – but remember them all in your prayers in the coming weeks:

- PETER DEUTSCH sends greetings from the Swiss Baptist Union, and will be at the Congress
- DOUGLAS DUNLOP of Queensland, Australia served in ministry from 1949 to 1996 and is now 80 and in good health
- TAPPIO LOHIKKO writes as pastor of the Tampere Baptist Church in Finland, and his wife ANNELI is the Mission Secretary and Bible School teacher of the Finnish B.U.
- RALPH MARTIN sends his greetings from Haggard School of Theology at Azusa Pacific University in the U.S.A.
- LEIF OLIN, of the Swedish Baptist Mission in Finland, has recently moved from Vasa to Sundom
- SIMON OXLEY writes of 'the view of snow-clad mountains from my office windows', as he continues to serve at the World Council of Churches in Switzerland – though he returns to the UK regularly to watch his beloved Manchester City F.C.!
- HANS SINNING of Feldbach, Austria has returned to teaching, having served a Baptist Church in Vienna for some years
- BILLY TARANGER is Principal of the Baptist Theological Seminary in Stabekk, Norway, and also hopes to be with us in Birmingham

Finally,

- WILFRED HIGHFIELD served in Stafford, England for about 6 years after World War 2 before returning to Canada. Now aged 90, and living in Calgary, he sent a donation towards the Journal's work.

What a great variety of experience and background! I look forward to hearing from more of you – and if the Fellowship can put members back in contact with each other, we will do so. By the way, it would also be good to hear from women in Baptist ministry – we know you are out there!

AND DON'T FORGET – SEE YOU AT THE BWA CONGRESS – BIRMINGHAM 2005.

Yours in Christ,
Rev. Michael J. Cleaves, International Secretary, BMF

BAPTIST TIMES INTERNSHIP SCHEME

The Baptist Times is seeking to expand its internship scheme, and would welcome applications from ministers eligible for sabbatical leave. The scheme enables suitable candidates to receive valuable journalistic training and experience over a period of 1-3 months, which would typically involve them learning the basics of news and feature writing and making a substantial contribution to the paper.

Ministers would gain:

- A thorough grounding in what makes a news story, which would provide them with excellent training in relating to local and national press
- Enhanced writing skills
- An understanding of the nature of journalism, particularly from a Christian perspective
- Experience of working in a close-knit and disciplined team
- Exposure to a wider Christian and Baptist world than local ministry often provides
- An opportunity to contribute to a significant denominational ministry.

Ministers would be able to apply for support from the BU Sabbatical Fund. A condition of this grant is that there is some theological reflection about the placement.

In the case of the Baptist Times this might include issues around communication, how we decide what matters, denominational identity, and the experience of moving from a congregational ministry in which relationships are often paramount to a workplace focused on delivering a product.

Applications for internships should be made to the editor, Hazel Southam.

Please include some examples of your writing. For informal discussions please telephone Mark Woods on 01235 517671.

Mark Woods
News Editor
Baptist Times
(+44)1235517671

Book Reviews

Edited by John Houseago

Daring to be different - being a faith family in a secular World. Sarah Johnson. Darton, Longman and Todd. 2004. £9.95

The title of the book reminded me of the Ronseal advert — what the book says on the cover is what the book contains in its pages!

Sarah Johnson, a practising Roman Catholic, takes us through the ways in which the practice of her Christian Faith has enriched her own family life and her own family life has enriched her faith. Sarah uses this experience to provide encouragement and practical ideas to other families who want their faith to become a means of enhancement to their experience of family rather than a social embarrassment to be kept in the closet of family secrets.

The author is honest about her own success and failure, good humoured, practical, realistic and easy to read. The author also takes the opportunity to encourage the reader to look beyond “happy family” to ways in which fully functioning Christian family can enhance wider society

The chapters explore issues of praying together, meal times, bed times, holiday times, following the Christian calendar, church attending and faith sharing. As for a weakness - although the book makes reference to the reconstituted families that are becoming such an increasing phenomena of our age, it is most immediately relevant to a traditional family unit experiencing a more middle class existence and who are attending an established, denominational, traditional form of church.

Having said that, this is a book I would have appreciated getting hold of when my family were younger and is full of sound and helpful advice, good ideas and practical suggestions easily adapted by a family of any denominational or non-denominational stream of the Christian faith.

I will have no hesitation in recommending the book to families in my congregation and may well adapt elements of it for my August all age worship services this summer.

Keith Nichols

Journeying in Faith. Alan Jamieson. SPCK £11.99

I found this book profound and deeply moving. Jamieson aims to help make sense of the desert or dark night experiences of faith, when foundations are rocked to the core and total reassessment of ones understanding of God, church, faith, everything, takes place; deep questioning and severe doubt, which assail even the once strongest of Christians. Too often the established churches cannot handle these deeply questioning and doubting people, who subsequently lose their trust church and seek help and support elsewhere. In the process they suffer the rebuke and rejection of the communities to which they had once been so committed. Jamieson suggests that faith and doubt are not in fact opposites, but are two sides of the same coin. “*Maybe it is certainty, not doubt, that is the antithesis of faith.*” he postulates.

With a wonderful mixture of research, personal and biblical stories, and penetrating insight Jamieson gently but firmly demonstrates that this kind of

'struggling faith' is a genuine part of Christian experience and that the pain and agony of desert experiences can lead to a deeper and more genuine faith and a renewed call to ministry. "We sometimes need to be reminded that to be called Israel - the one who wrestles with God - was a title of endearment and praise from God." says Jamieson.

This book is both for those who are experiencing such dark and desert places and for those who recognise the reality of such experiences and wish to better support them. Jamieson tries not to be too critical of those who do not seem able to sympathise with the doubters, but there is a clear challenge to grow up and face the real issues of real people with honesty, integrity and humility.

Philip Mader-Grayson.

The Filmgoer's Guide to God. Tim Cawkwell, DLT, 2004 ISBN 0-232-52466-1, 170pp, £10.95

The cinema has emerged as a relatively new medium for reflecting on religious themes. However the film industry is not always known for its balanced or insightful views and there are few books on this subject. So when I received this book I wondered about the attitudes it would take and which films it would consider. I was pleased to find a list of contents that suggested a thoughtful approach and a list of films that included at least some I had seen and enjoyed.

Cawkwell takes in a wide range of films, covering European and American film-makers from 1925 to 2000. The majority of films comes from the last half of the 20th Century and from the particular contribution of four film-makers: Bresson, Dreyer, Rossellini and Tarkovsky. Taking themes from his chosen films, Cawkwell shows us how people experience redemption in the face of death, the gift of

unexpected grace and most powerfully the necessity of sacrifice in living. The last section of the book considers the life of Jesus in film from *Ben-Hur* to *The Last Temptation of Christ*. In closing, Cawkwell says, 'we need a film maker to film the passion story on an epic scale.' How frustrating that this book was published before Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* and therefore has no mention of it when churches have been engaging with this film and its impact.

There are some satisfying insights on films that are well known - the Coen Brother's *O Brother, where art thou?* and Coppola's *The Godfather*, but it also inspired me to look out for less familiar films that I will look forward to seeing in the future. There is a useful appendix in the 'Further Reading and Viewing Section' and no bibliography here but a filmography. If you have them, copies of Halliwell's *Film Guide* and *Who's Who* are helpful to check out a little more detail, but they are certainly not necessary to enjoy the book.

Cawkwell has an accessible style without being simplistic, a rewarding read for fresh perspectives on films.

**Sarah Parry,
Shoreditch Tabernacle**

Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church's Ministry. Edward Farley. Westminster John Knox Press 2003. xviii + 189pp. £14.99 ISBN 0 664 22498 9

The subtitle of this interesting collection of essays, 'Unconventional Thoughts on the Church's Ministry', indicates the tone and subject matter, and the spelling of 'practicing' is presumably intended to indicate Farley's concern that the gospel should be expressed in practice. This is not to say that it should not also be preached.

Far from it. In one essay Farley is at pains to emphasize that what should be preached is the gospel, and that this should be the subject matter of preaching, rather than the exposition of specific biblical texts. Sometimes preaching the gospel may involve preaching against the text. An example of a sermon by the author would have been useful to illustrate how he practices (sic) what he teaches. Something he himself implicitly acknowledged when, towards the end of one chapter on preaching he says 'I realize that this chapter is frustratingly vague'!

The book contains thirteen essays in three sections. The first is headed 'Practical Theology' (five essays), the second 'Homiletics and Preaching' (three) and the third 'Christian Education and Pastoral Care' (five). As with most collections, different essays will be found helpful by different people and whilst it reflects its American context most of what Farley writes is relevant and transposable to ministry in this country. For him it is important that ministers are theologians and that we see theology not as an aspect of ministry but as a way of carrying out ministry.

The print is a little small and the argument sometimes concise but there is much here to stimulate ministers to reflect on their practice, and also to provide good discussion material for ministers' meetings on subjects like preaching, pastoral care and Christian education.

**John Matthews, Tilehouse Street,
Hitchin**

Creative Church Leadership. Ed. Charles Handy. Canterbury Press. £14.99

Much of the popular literature on leadership comes from the USA. Bill Hybels urges Ministers to deliberately and consistently read books on leadership. This book should be added to such a

reading plan. It is not a 'how to' book, and it has diverse contributions on the subject of creative church leadership - but that is one of its strengths.

One of the tasks of leadership is critical reflection. A leader needs to critically reflect on his or her own personality, his or her own model of leadership, and the denominational or local church expectations. That can only be done by exploring the question from perspectives that are different to one's own. Don't be put off by the cover, the contents are worth reading.

Charles Handy makes an important contribution in stating how we need to understand the way the different roles or purposes of a local church can actually pull in different directions. Which minister has not experienced the tension between fellowship and evangelism? Bill Allen highlights that character determines our credibility more than our skills. Pauline Perry believes we can learn from the secular world, but highlights the resistance in the church to such a notion. We need to be able to stand apart from our culture as well as engage with it.

Many of the writers usefully distinguish between leadership and management. In terms of planning one's own leadership development two of the most helpful chapters are a database of resources, and a review of leadership literature and leadership development centres in this country. Research shows that inspiring leadership is the single most important factor in growing healthy church communities. This book contributes significantly towards making that happen.

**Shaun Lambert - Senior Minister
Stanmore Baptist Church**