

THE BAPTIST MINISTERS' JOURNAL 1946-1992

CHANGES DURING A GENERATION OF MINISTRY

There are many ways of trying to identify changes in the perception and practice of the ordained ministry in Baptist churches since the Second World War. This study is based on a survey of the themes that have appeared during this period in the *Baptist Ministers' Journal* (until 1992 *The Fraternal*: a change in title which is significant in itself, especially in its delay, when one considers how long women ministers have been around). It is not easy to be consistent and objective in a survey over such an extended period, during which attitudes towards ministry have changed subtly, yet sometimes profoundly; more than 1200 articles cover a wide variety of topics and are approached in many different ways. Even more difficult are the problems attached to interpretation and evaluation, in terms of the underlying changes in ministerial perceptions and practice. Editorial policy has played a large role in determining themes, writers and views expressed, and this policy has, no doubt, not always reflected concerns of ministers in general. It seems justifiable, however, to assume that there will be *some* correspondence between what is found in the journal and how ministers are thinking about and practising their ministries. Moreover, contributors do not write on behalf of the ministry in general and some let off steam about a particular subject, or promote a personal interest, in a way that does not find sympathy with most of their colleagues. It is impossible to tell, without engaging in much wider research, to what extent the journal contributors are typical in their concerns. The assumption taken here is that, over a period of years, the contributions will tend to reflect broader interests within the ministry.

Articles have here been classified according to their primary theme, and changes in the pattern of themes over the years have been analysed. Such classification inevitably involves a degree of personal, and therefore subjective judgement, as many cover several different themes but, by using fairly general groupings, significant changes can be identified. In order to make this approach manageable, three five-year periods have been selected, each separated by fifteen years, and the themes covered in each of those periods compared. These five-year periods are 1947-51 (period I), 1967-71 (period II), and 1987-91 (period III).

THE INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

One set of articles covers overseas and missionary themes. There has been a significant drop in the proportion of these articles since the immediate post-War period, from about 19% in period I to about 10% in period III. Equally significant has been the change in the countries dealt with. In period I a large proportion (over half) were about Baptist church life in the 'Old Commonwealth' (Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa), whereas in periods II and III these countries were scarcely represented at all (although some of the *contributors* came from these countries). There has been a corresponding increase, especially in the latest period, in articles concerning church life in Europe, although interestingly in period III these have, with

one exception, been concerned with the Eastern Block. The shift from Commonwealth to Europe has, of course, been a feature of national orientation over those years, but there does not seem to have been a corresponding growth of interest in church life in the European Community, and in general there appears to be less of an international perspective than there used to be.

PREACHING AND PASTORAL CARE

In looking at the minister's work within the local church, there is an interesting comparison to be made between the two most prominent aspects - preaching and pastoral care. The number of articles dealing specifically with preaching has dropped from around 5% to around 3% between periods I and III, and the number dealing with pastoral care has increased from 1% to 5%. Although in the first period pastoral visiting is often mentioned as part of the minister's work in a general way, very few pastoral issues are dealt with in any detail, whereas in periods II and III there are articles, for example, headed 'A Pastoral Problem'¹ (concerned with the frail elderly), 'Clinical Theology',² 'Ministry to the Imprisoned',³ 'Family Ministry',⁴ 'Ministry to AIDS Sufferers'.⁵ Typical of the earlier period, on the other hand, are articles headed 'The Minister Finding Illustrations',⁶ 'Systematic Preaching',⁷ and 'The Pulpit Ministry of the Pastor'.⁸ Preaching as a concern is not absent altogether in the later period: after a barren patch through most of the '70s and '80s there have been three articles in successive years from 1989 to 1991. It does seem, however, that the balance of concern has tilted away from preaching and has deepened as far as pastoral care is concerned. This change in emphasis from Preacher to Pastor in the minister's self-understanding has implications for the minister's relationship with the congregation. A pastor listens to people, a preacher speaks to them; a pastor identifies with people, getting alongside, a preacher retains a necessary distance; a pastor relates to people primarily on an individual and personal basis, a preacher relates to people corporately; a pastor's agenda is predominantly set by the needs he is presented with, a preacher's agenda is set predominantly by Scripture. In practice, of course, both are important, but the balance is constantly shifting and has discernibly shifted over the past forty-five years. Evidence for this is to be found elsewhere, not least in the rapid growth of interest in pastoral theology in the second half of the twentieth century.

THE NATURE OF THE MINISTRY

As one would expect, the ministry in a general sense, rather than dealing with particular aspects of the minister's work, has featured consistently over the years. In periods I and III about 10% of articles dealt with this, and in period II this rose to 15%. In period I the articles often appear to be fairly general, reflecting confidence in the pastoral office and often concentrating on the personal life of the minister - on what he *is* rather than on what he *does*: for example, 'The Minister and Himself',⁹ 'The Poet's Eye and the Pastoral Office',¹⁰ 'The Inner Life',¹¹ 'Our Abiding Ministry',¹² 'A Year's Reading'.¹³ This rather exalted, often idealized, view of the ministry is found in later periods too, but to a lesser extent. Period II is more

preoccupied with the contemporary problems and challenges to ministry: 'Pastoral Service in a Secular Age',¹⁴ 'Ministry in the '60s',¹⁵ 'The Vocation of a Dissenting Minister Today',¹⁶ and 'Ministry Tomorrow',¹⁷ probably reflecting general uncertainty about the ministry in the late '60s, culminating in the BU Report *Ministry Tomorrow* (1969), which caused such a furore. (This sense of unease about the nature and future of the Baptist ministry was also demonstrated in *Ministry in Question*, published in 1971 and edited by Alec Gilmore,¹⁸ in which various contributors described the contemporary crisis of ministry in the Free Churches, one going so far as to suggest that full-time service in the ministry was becoming an anachronism). There is also in period II a growing sense of the ministry as a career, with articles on such practical issues as ministerial settlement and retirement accommodation, concerns remarkably absent in the earlier period. In period III it is even more prominent, with frequent articles on finance or housing. Most of the rest relate to various aspects of ministerial stress and health. The contrast between articles dealing with ministry in the late '40s and those in the late '80s is quite dramatic. It is impossible to envisage concerns like 'Ministerial Mileages',¹⁹ 'Beware of the Insurance Company Glossy',²⁰ and 'Pastors Anonymous' finding a place a generation earlier.²¹

These developments are significant. There seems to be a less idealistic and more pragmatic and functional approach to the ministry today than there used to be, as if it were a career not fundamentally different in nature from any other kind of employment a Christian may feel called to. In some ways this represents a dilution of the special sense of ministerial vocation, possibly one consequence of the ferment of the late '60s. The fundamental questions being asked then were no longer being asked in the '80s, and there has been some regaining of confidence in ministry (best seen in a series of articles on the ministry in 1983, one of which affirmed in its title, 'I Believe in the Minister'²²). There seems, however, to be more concern about how to survive and function within the ministry than concern to understand the nature of the ministry itself, almost as if the more serious and profound questions have been shelved.

In the late '40s and early '50s, there seems to have been little questioning about the place of the ministry in the church as such. Any questions there were tended to centre around the form this ministry should take, especially in view of debates about ecumenism.²³ In the late '60s and early '70s there was a crisis of confidence in the ministry, with the main challenge coming not from other church traditions but from an increasingly secular society, in which the church's decline and perceived irrelevance were becoming more and more painfully apparent. In the '80s, the ministry seems to attract less debate and interest. Individuals experience particular problems and joys of ministering, but the ordained ministry (or more especially the ordained Baptist ministry) as a concept of theological importance and value has to a large extent been lost sight of. The debate over eldership and the implications for the ordained ministry surfaced in the mid-'80s,²⁴ but does not appear to have continued beyond that.

A more pragmatic approach is reflected elsewhere. Less deal with doctrinal themes. Theological reflection is more practical and less dogmatic: 'The Theology of Generosity - Financial Management for Churches',²⁵ 'The Theology of Blessing',²⁶

'The Theology of Bereavement'.²⁷ This contrasts with regular, earlier contributions tackling major doctrinal themes such as atonement and eschatology. Christian doctrine would appear to be a less central concern for Baptist ministers today, and theology is primarily of interest when it sheds light on a particular aspect of ministerial activity or serves some practical purpose.

What contemporary issues in church life and society have been the concern of ministers over the past generation? Recently there seems to have been an increase in articles dealing with problems and questions in contemporary church life, such as restorationism, church management and congregational church government, probably reflecting the increasing variety and change in church practice. In period I, the sacraments were a recurring theme.²⁸

As far as moral and social issues are concerned, in period I there was particular interest in the relationship between church and state: 'The Minister and Industry',²⁹ 'New Testament Doctrine of Society',³⁰ 'The Contribution of the Social Services Department',³¹ and 'The Church and Industry'.³² During period II the challenge of urban mission was raised a number of times,³³ along with several general articles on ethics ('Christian Ethics Today',³⁴ 'Faith and Morals',³⁵ 'Christianity and Medical Ethics'³⁶). During period III, the emphasis was less on social issues and more on evangelism, probably reflecting the visits of Billy Graham and the start of the Decade of Evangelism. If there is a trend, it seems to have been a decreasing interest in society and a corresponding increase in interest in church life and activity.

Any such survey is bound to reflect to a large extent personal interests and prejudices - as do the articles themselves. General conclusions are hazardous, yet are bound to be made. The greater realism about the task of ministry and openness to practical questions, such as housing and career structure, seems preferable to the high-minded but unsustainable idealism of a previous generation. I, for one, am glad that articles headed 'Our Abiding Ministry' or 'The Test of Greatness in the Christian Ministry' are less likely today. I welcome questions of human need being dealt with in a deeper and more careful way, reflecting the real challenge of pastoral work in the ministry. This needs to go further still, as the complexity and depth of pastoral problems confronted by the minister continues to increase.

Other trends cause concern. There seems a more inward-looking spirit reflected in the later volumes, with less interest in the international scene, and perhaps less in social and political issues. Articles on local church management and ministerial stress are welcome, but are a sign of greater introspection. We need to widen the perspective of ministry, to see it in its international and social context, as well as that of the local church. Another cause for concern is the lack of serious and practical theological reflection on the nature and task of the ordained ministry today. This is as important an issue as ever - perhaps more so. Without theological grounding, the ministry cannot be sustained securely, nor able to find its true God-given role in today's changing world and church.

Among particular articles that impressed me was one by Bruce Hardy in 1968, entitled 'Ministry in the mid-Sixties'.³⁷ It was a time of great uncertainty and

malaise, with worrying numbers leaving the ministry and questions about the very possibility of ministry in an increasingly secular age. Hardy asked pertinently 'What keeps us *in* the ministry?' He answers that theology is still vital and enabling, that pastoral disciplines give zest and satisfaction if pursued professionally, that the 'service of the house of God, and thus preaching, are still a necessary means of grace', and that being released for prayer and to exercise an incarnational ministry of Word, sacrament and compassion is a great privilege. I was grateful for his honesty and insight, as I have been for so much of what has been published in the journal over the past forty-five years.

NOTES

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| 1 | Vol.150, October 1968: E. E. Paskett. | | R. E. O. White; and Vol.82, October 1951: |
| 2 | Vol.156, April 1970: articles by F. J. Roberts and P. Harrison. | | H. Ingli James. Later in the 1950s articles show a greater awareness still of the challenge of ecumenism, and in Vol.89, July 1953, B. S. Lewis and G. le Quesne tackled the issue of 'Baptists and Episcopacy'. |
| 3 | Vol.222, April 1988: W. J. Davies. | | |
| 4 | Vol.226, April 1989: R. Messenger. | | |
| 5 | Vol.236, October 1991: P. J. Clarke. | | |
| 6 | Vol.64, April 1947: L. Higgs. | 24 | T. Rogers, 'Eldership', Vol.208, July 1984; and P. Fiddes, 'Ministry and Ordination', Vol.211, July 1985. |
| 7 | Vol.66, October 1947: J. Mursell. | | |
| 8 | Vol.71, January 1949: Gilbert Laws. | | |
| 9 | Vol.63, January 1947: M. B. Simmons. | 25 | Vol.226, April 1989: D. F. Tennant. |
| 10 | Vol.65, July 1947: W. Fancutt. | 26 | Vol.227, July 1989: S. Greasley. |
| 11 | Vol.71, January 1949: Ithel Jones. | 27 | Vol.225, January 1989: G. Walters. |
| 12 | Articles in Vol.71, January 1949: T. R. Richards, and Vol.73, July 1949: F. Hastings. | 28 | L. A. Read, 'The Ordinances', Vol.67, January 1948; G. R. Beasley-Murray, 'Sacraments', Vol.70, October 1948; E. F. Knight, 'A Reconsideration of the Sacraments', Vol.1982, October 1951. |
| 13 | Vol.80, April 1951: W. J. Grant. | | |
| 14 | Vol.143, January 1967: J. J. Brown. | | |
| 15 | Vol.148, April 1968: E. B. Hardy. | | |
| 16 | Vol.158, October 1970: H. A. Jacquet. | 29 | Vol.78, October 1950: C. A. Pither. |
| 17 | Articles in Vol.159, January 1971: V. R. Sumner, and Vol.161, July 1971: W. M. S. West. | 30 | Vol.76, April 1950: E. Buckley. |
| 18 | Published by Darton, Longman and Todd. | 31 | Vol.81, July 1951: T. G. Dunning. |
| 19 | Vol.219, July 1987: C. Sidney Hall. | 32 | Vol.81, July 1951: P. Abrecht. |
| 20 | Vol.220, October 1987: P. J. Cooke. | 33 | D. J. Hollidge, 'A Cool Look at the Inner City', Vol.144, April 1967; G. Young, 'A City Pastorate in Glasgow', Vol.159, January 1971; C. Marchant, 'Reaching Them', and R. Dowley and P. Tucker, 'In Process of Change', Vol.162, October 1971. |
| 21 | Vol.231, July 1990: P. Clements-Jewery. | | |
| 22 | Vol.202, January 1983: K. Sobey. | 34 | Vol.151, January 1969: W. D. Hudson. |
| 23 | There were several articles during this period on Baptists in the new ecumenical environment - 'Baptists and the World Council of Churches', Vol.74, October 1949: E. A. Payne; 'Church Relationships in England', Vol.80, April 1951; | 35 | Vol.152, April 1969: W. D. Hudson. |
| | | 36 | Vol.157, July 1970: J. T. Aitken. |
| | | 37 | Vol.148, April 1968: E. B. Hardy. |

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