

Retired ministers matter

by Paul Beasley-Murray

Retirement Matters for Ministers is the title of a wide-ranging report based on my recent research into how Baptist ministers experience retirement. The research was based on 17 in-depth interviews and a lengthy questionnaire completed by 53 people. In this article I want to look at just one issue within the research: the sense of 'abandonment' felt by many retired ministers. It is important to say that as a result of my report, I have been assured that the Baptist Union and its associations will review, and hopefully change, some of its current policies with regard to retired ministers. However, I believe it is helpful for readers to understand what the policy has been in recent years. Here are some of the findings.

Have you had a pastoral visit or personal letter or phone call from your regional minister?

Almost four-fifths (79%) had experienced no contact with a regional minister since retirement. One respondent said: 'I wrote to him twice, but received no acknowledgement or reply'. Another said: 'Even after the death of my wife I had no contact'. Clearly some associations have different policies from others. In the South Eastern Baptist Association, I am told, every retired minister receives a Christmas visit from a regional minister bearing the annual gift of a Christmas cake. The South-Western Association has appointed pastoral care coordinators for retired ministers, who are accountable to one of the regional ministers. But such is not the norm elsewhere.

Are you content with the support you currently receive?

75% are not content with the support they receive. Indeed, one response was 'What support?'. Within the context of relationships with the Baptist Union and regional ministry, this is surely a cause for great dis-ease.

It is important to realise that the context of this question is the relationship with the Baptist Union and its regional ministers. In addition to the 25% who are content, a further 15% say that they are content with the support they receive, but they explicitly state that it is not 'thanks to Baptists', or at least not 'thanks to the Baptist Union and its regional ministers'.

One, who did not receive support from the association or Union, said: 'I don't expect

support from the Baptist family staff. You have to get on with it and find people to journey with'. However, he and his wife are in the unusual position of being in a church where there are two other retired ministers and their wives, with whom they meet up on a regular basis.

Other comments include: 'The silence was deafening and continues'; 'I would like regional ministers to know that I exist'; 'There was virtually no support from the Area Ministry team: it was left to the initiative of a locally well-known retired minister to bring other retired ministers and spouses together. I'm not complaining but it's almost as though we became 'invisible' to the BU and the Area'; 'It would be nice to have had regular follow-up from the regional team to make sure retirement was working'.

If you are not content with the support you receive, then how do you feel churches, associations and indeed the Baptist Union could better support retired ministers?

Regional ministers need 'to recognise that we have a vast library of gathered ministerial knowledge that is left untapped for the most part'. 'There needs to be some acknowledgement we exist—as it is there is no Baptist Union handbook (in which are names used to appear); and the names of retired ministers no longer appear in association handbooks'. 'It is a great shame that the Association makes no provision for retired ministers to meet from time to time. We do get a printed card from the team at Christmas, but that does not add up to pastoral care'. 'The Baptist Steering Group [of the Baptist Union] seems to assume that pastoral care of ministers was solely the responsibility of the local church (questions asked via the Baptist Ministers Fellowship & the Retired Baptist Ministers Housing Association): in other words, retired ministers are no different from other retired people'. One of the saddest comments was, 'I feel so far removed that I cannot offer any suggestions'.

Along with others one respondent urged: 'Make the visitation of retired ministers a high priority for area ministers, who seem to forget we exist but who would benefit from our wisdom/experience'. Another wrote: 'I know regional ministers' time is pressured and resources are limited, but I think one regional minister in each association should have responsibility for the retired minister in their area and keep in regular contact by phone or e-mail or by arranging meetings. A phone call once in a while to ask 'How you're doing' would be nice! By definition, pastoral care should be offered, not sought in an emergency'. Yet another said: 'I feel ministers enter ministry 'with a bang' (eg recognition at Assembly) and leave with a whimper. The Baptist Union is 'missing a trick' in not using the example of 'life-long' ministry as an inspiration to those coming into and possibly struggling in ministry. It's more about recognition than support really. There is also a reluctance on the part of some regional leaders to see the value that retired ministers could bring to ministers' meetings provided they did not harp back to 'how it

‘was done in my day’ but encourage other ministers in their struggles which most of us have been through’. A similar comment was expressed by another respondent: ‘For a number of years, I was a member of the Association Board of Trustees. One of my oftenrepeated suggestions was to draw attention to the number of “young” (newly retired) ministers living in the Association with a wealth of skills and experience that the Association might use to their advantage’.

Honouring the ministry covenant

At the heart of Baptist ecclesiology is the concept of covenanting together. John Smyth, for instance, defined a ‘visible community of saints’ as ‘two or more joined together by covenant with God and themselves...for their mutual edification and for God’s glory’. There has been an increasing recognition among Baptists of the need to rediscover their roots and realise afresh that, in becoming church members, we enter into a ‘covenant’ which involves ‘covenant relationships’.¹

In 2001 the Baptist Union produced *Covenant 21—A Covenant for a Gospel People* with a view to it being used not just within the local church, but also within associations and the Baptist Union itself. ‘We come this day to covenant with you and with companion disciples to watch over each other and to walk together before you in ways known and to be made known’.

In recent years British Baptists have adopted a covenant understanding of the relationship between ministers (including retired ministers) and the Baptist Union: those who are accredited by the Baptist Union ‘have entered into a covenant with the Baptist Union to live in conformity with the way of life this high calling demands and to receive from the Union such support, recognition and trust as befits those who serve Christ in this way’.² The *Ignite* report (December 2015) whose recommendations have been largely accepted by the Baptist Union Council and are in the process of being worked upon, states in its section on *Living in Covenant Relationship*, that ‘we sense a need to re-state and reclaim our Baptist understanding of covenant ministry’, but nowhere speaks of retired ministers as belonging to this ministry covenant.³ This omission is regrettable—and hopefully in future discussions by the Baptist Union Council consideration will be given to how this ministry covenant can be made more relevant to the needs of retired Baptist ministers.

However, as the analysis of the data of this report on retired ministers shows, the current ‘ministerial covenant’ between the Baptist Union and retired ministers has—with some exceptions—largely broken down. For the most part there is no ‘support’, no ‘recognition’, and no ‘trust’.⁴

Ministry beyond retirement

If, as almost all the respondents in this survey have stated, God has still a call on the lives of retired ministers, then this needs to be more clearly recognised by the Baptist Union and its associations. Retirement may mark the end of leading a church, but it does not mark the end of ministry. The pace of life may have changed, but most ministers when they retire are still keen to use their experience and energy in the service of God. Of course, the day will come when health and strength will fail, and ministers will need to make the transition from active retirement to a more passive form of retirement—but in the meantime many ministers have a good number of years before that they enter into their ‘second retirement’. Yet currently most retired ministers receive no help from the Baptist Union and its associations to continue to live out their call—it is left to the retired to take the initiative to discover opportunities for service, and that is not always easy.

Many who entered ministry with a deep sense of God’s call find that at retirement they are regarded simply as ‘employees’ whose time of service to the ‘company’ or ‘firm’ is over. This is a secular view of retirement and fails to recognise the ongoing call of God on their lives. When the time comes for ministers to hand over the responsibility of leading a church, the Baptist Union and its associations should help ministers to discover what God wants them to do next and where they can best serve him and his church. Not to do so is to deny tried and tested vocations and to deprive churches of a wealth of leadership resource.

Louis Armstrong, the great jazz musician once said: ‘Musicians don’t retire; they stop when there’s no more music in them’. That too is how many retired ministers feel: they still have divine music in their souls and they will only stop giving voice to that music when they join the greater chorus in heaven!⁵

A way forward

With much of Baptist Union life now delegated from the ‘centre’ (Didcot) to the ‘regions’ (associations), regional ministers have a key role to play in ensuring the well-being of retired ministers. Regional ministers are not to be equated with ‘bishops’—Baptists have a very different understanding of the nature of the church from Anglican. They do, however, represent the Baptist Union in their associations, and have a key role in implementing the covenant between retired ministers and the Baptist Union.

Precisely how regional ministers might implement the ministry covenant is open for discussion. Although the Baptist Union now has double—if not treble—the number of regional ministers compared with the old ‘superintendency’ system, there is no doubt that

with the delegation of so much Baptist Union life to the regions, they no longer have as much time to care for the ministers in their association as did the previous generations of area superintendents.⁷ In my judgement the only way in which regional ministers can care effectively for retired ministers in their association is to delegate much of the day-to-day care to a small group of 'retirement officers'—perhaps made up of ministers in the first stages of retirement—who would serve as mentors and if not even as pastors to the ministers in their care. From time to time the 'retirement officers' would then report back to their regional ministers.⁸

The appointment of such 'retirement officers' does not remove from churches which have retired ministers in their congregations their duty of care. As with the Anglican system, the local church has a primary duty of care. Ideally churches and retirement officers would work together, with churches taking the initiative in informing retirement officers of any significant pastoral issues.

However, retired ministers need more than pastoral care—they need to be helped to discover how they might continue to respond to God's call. Retirement offices could have a key role to play: not simply in visiting but also in putting in place a programme of mentoring. The first six months of retirement could be regarded as a 'sabbatical' during which ministers could begin to adjust to what for most will be a new home, a new church, and a new community. After six months, however, many will be ready to take on new opportunities of service.

My proposal is that, as with the Anglican system, retirement officers would help ministers prepare for retirement through one or more 'exit interviews' and continue to care for ministers in retirement through annual visits. The personal touch—and not emails—is what is wanted. Pastoral care will involve not simply being there for the crises in life—it will also involve helping retired ministers to find meaning ways in which they can continue to express the call that God has on their lives.⁹

Retirement officers will help regional ministers organise gatherings—at least once a year—when retired ministers and their spouses are invited to meet with the regional ministers, and ideally with the President of the Baptist Union too (would it be possible to encourage all presidents in their association visits to make time to meet with retired ministers?).

Inevitably there would be a cost to this new system of pastoral care for retired ministers. Although I do not envisage any remuneration for the new 'retirement officers', clearly their travel costs and other expenses would have to be met. Similarly, the costs of an annual social event for retired ministers would need to be paid for. The production and circulation of agreed guidelines for the pastoral care of retirement ministers which would need to go not just to retired ministers but also to all ministers in pastoral charge (otherwise how would they know they have a primary duty of care for retired

ministers?) would also entail a cost. However, I would envisage the limited costs would not be a burden on the funds of the Baptist Union and its associations.

The fact is retired ministers need to be honoured—rather than forgotten. They have borne the heat of the day—they have served God faithfully against all the odds. Retired ministers matter!

Paul Beasley-Murray is now a retired minister after long service to the denomination, and can be contacted on paulbeasleymurray@gmail.com. Copies of his full report are available from Peter Thomas (peter@pbthomas.com) at a cost of £5 + £2 postage. The guide mentioned at the start will be published by the BRF in February 2020.

Notes to text

1. "In a Baptist church, membership involves entering into a dynamic covenant relationship with one another - a relationship in which we commit ourselves not only to work together to extend Christ's Kingdom, but also to love one another and stand by one another whatever the cost". See Paul Beasley-Murray, *Radical Believers: The Baptist Way of Being the Church* (Baptist Union of Great Britain, Didcot 2nd edition 2006), pp72-76.
2. Preface to the Ministerial Recognition Rules relating to the Register of Nationally Accredited Ministers, adopted by the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain on 13 October 2016.
3. See *Ignite* Report 27-28.
4. One exception to this breakdown in the covenant is found in the concern shown by the Head of Ministries in cases where he is told—normally by a regional team minister—of the death of a retired minister. Andy Hughes, the current Head of Ministries, tells me that in such cases he sends a letter of condolence and a gift of £250 from the Baptist Union. However, it is important to note that this only happens when the Head of Ministries is notified of a death: for reasons of data protection the Baptist Pension Trust is not allowed to inform the Baptist Union of a death of a retired minister!
5. I am grateful for this analogy to Canon Hugh Dibbets, who in his retirement serves as the Evangelism Adviser in the Barking Episcopal Area of the Diocese of Chelmsford.
6. See Paul Beasley-Murray, *Radical Believers*, pp122-124.
7. In *Gathering for Worship: Patterns and Prayers for the Community of Disciples* (Canterbury Press, Norwich 2005) ed by Christopher Ellis & Myra Blyth, p11, regional ministers are asked the following people-centred question: "Do you accept the charge from Christ to care for his people with all faithfulness and compassion, watching over the life of the churches with all humility? Will you care for the weak, bring Christ's healing to the broken hearted, lift up the downcast, and pray regularly for those committed to you care?"
8. It may be that in a Baptist context it would be more helpful to talk of 'association mentors for the retired' rather than 'association retirement officers'—the function rather than the term is ultimately what concerns me.
9. On a different but related note, ministers' widows also need to be cared for, for many of them have also served God faithfully. Perhaps their welfare could be part of the brief of the proposed 'Retirement Officers'?

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