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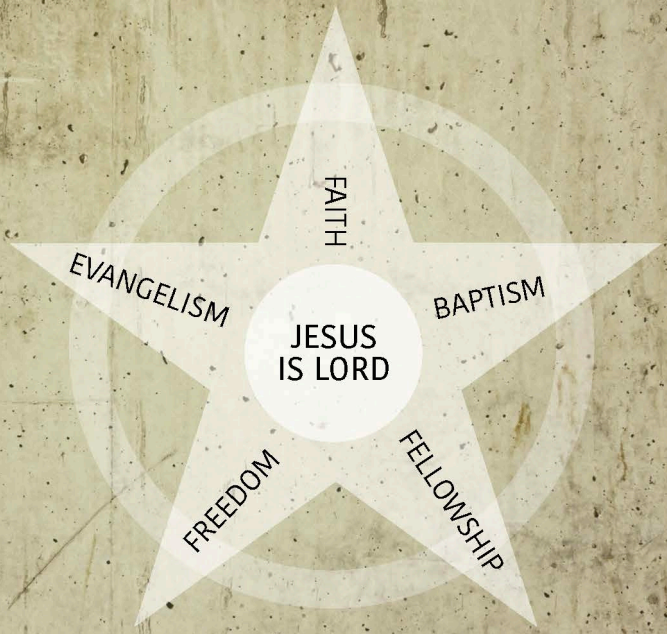

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A Profession of Faith? Professionalism in Baptist Ministry[1]

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore Baptist attitudes to professionalism in ministry in both historical and current thought. It will describe some of the challenges posed by a professionalisation of Baptist ministry and some of the benefits. It will then argue for a 'nurturing professionalism' and 'secure professional identity' in Baptist practice which can benefit ministers, congregations and society at large.

Key Words: professional, Baptist ministry, training, formation

This paper is part of a wider study into professional identity in Baptist ministry and the potential benefits of standardising certain aspects of formation. It arises from a desire for a more secure learning environment for Baptist ministers to develop their skills and teach each other.

To begin a paper on professionalism it is helpful to explore what we mean by this term. A dictionary definition has three strands to it:

> – the high standard that you expect from a person who is well trained in a particular job
> – great skill and ability
> – the practice of using professional players in sport[2]

This definition implies that a professional person has had some sort of specialised training, and that they are paid for the role they play in society. For a more nuanced understanding of what professionals represent for us in society at large Schon suggests that professionals and their specialist knowledge have been essential to the progress of society, despite the fact that society has begun to question the rights

[1] A version of this paper was first presented at Theology Live, Friday 28th January 2022.
[2] https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com.

and legitimacy of those professional groups to make decision on our behalf.[3]

Another essential aspect of professional behaviour might be the ability to keep learning in the presence of continued experience — we would not expect the professionals in our lives to experience one body of knowledge and then never learn again. Indeed some idea of keeping up to date and reflecting on that knowledge would be part of what we would expect from any professional person. Kolb explores this in great detail in a way that has been significant for many professional groups.[4]

We might want to add that society expects certain levels of behaviour from professional people. Professional sports people are expected to behave in a way that honours their sport and other professionals in a way that behoves their place as respected people in society. Baptists have standards that churches have always demanded from their ministers, albeit some of those have changed over the centuries: I can't remember anyone being thrown off the list of accredited ministers recently for encouraging dancing or cock-fighting.[5] The former two aspects (training and remuneration) have historically caused us a few more problems. From the beginning Baptists have struggled with the idea that ministers can be trained or educated at all,[6] seeking to give at least as much kudos to the gifts that are given by the Holy Spirit to an individual called into ministry as the skills they could accumulate in college. Indeed our dissenting roots give us reason to cling to an idea of ministry that frees us from the ties of establishment and class. Choosing to appoint our clergy from within the body of the church, a church of believers who have put themselves at risk to be part of this body of Christ, was always going to lead to a mistrust of outside influences.[7] At a time when clergy and even evangelists were paid for

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[3] Donald A. Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (London: Basic Books, 1991), 3-5.
[4] David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (2nd Ed.; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2015), 61-64.
[5] Raymond Brown, *The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1986),30.
[6] Brown, *English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century*, 39.
[7] B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century,* (Rev. Ed.; Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1996), 12.

by the state via a system of compulsory tithes,[8] calling one's own ministers and guarding that neutrality from the state must have seemed necessary and worth protecting.[9] So, supporting ministers with education and finance was the subject of much debate among General Baptists, until, in 1702 the General Association made plans to establish an Academy. However, the uneducated state of Baptist ministers was still a problem towards the end of that century. As Anthony R. Cross highlighted, for ministers to be 'useful' to their congregations and the communities they found themselves in, they needed to be educated, trained and free to make it their main occupation.[10] While a general education is something we can now take as given for anyone in Baptist ministerial formation, the need for specific skills and training to be 'useful' to the church remains, as over two centuries later the 'professional' qualities of competence and integrity are still being argued for by Paul Goodliff in his work, *Shaped for Service*: 'The "good minister" is both proficient at the tasks of their calling, and righteous in their living'.[11] Later he suggests that these core tasks of our calling form the central theme to the 'fugue' of our ministry life. Is there something about these core tasks that we are expected to be proficient in that mark us out as professionals?

It seems that Baptists still recognise the need to affirm the traits of professionalism but for very good historical reasons we are reluctant to use the word to describe what we expect of our ministers. The rise of ministry as a profession in the nineteenth century brought with it status and a distinction from the people ministers were trained to care for. Professionalism in ministry was seen as desire to make ministry more allied to other public roles and to expect some of the perks and protections that those roles provided.[12] This doesn't sit comfortably with Baptist understanding of the priesthood of all believers.[13] However, in seeking to distance ourselves from a privileged and

[8] White, *English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century,* 25.
[9] White, *English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century,* 70.
[10] Anthony R. Cross, *Communicate Simply You Must Understand Profoundly: Preparation for Ministry Among British Baptists,* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 2016), 85.
[11] Paul W. Goodliff, *Shaped for Service: Ministerial Formation and Virtue Ethics* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 13.
[12] Anthony Russell, *The Clerical Profession* (London: SPCK, 1980), 10-11, 32.
[13] Nigel Wright, *Free Church, Free State: A Positive Baptist Vision* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 42-43.

socially advantageous expression of ministry we may have lost something vital in the way we train and nurture Baptist ministers.

Professionalism means many things to many people. In my experience as a nurse it could be a bridge to build relationship on rather than a wall to hide behind and it is this idea of professionalism that I want to apply to Baptist ministry. In this article I shall explore the contrast between my training as a nurse and that of a Baptist minister. Although nurse training has changed considerably since, I think that my experience still has a voice that challenges the way we train Baptist ministers today.

So let me declare my auto-ethnographical position. Before becoming a minister I was a nurse in the NHS for over twenty years. My training and subsequent development as a health professional had key aspects which shaped the person I became in that role. From the beginning of my training we were taught that our uniform meant something — we wore it with pride and were expected to behave in certain ways while wearing it. In the East End of London in the 1980s it even conferred some kind of protection, because of the esteem in which nurses were held by the local criminal underworld. We were also taught that part of being a health professional was the ability to pass on skills and competencies to others and to be honest about our own skill deficits.[14] When I first stepped onto an acute medical ward at the beginning of my training I was hopelessly ill-equipped and there were times when this felt dangerous and frightening, but there was always the professional safety net of being required to flag up when I was not competent in a certain area of care. This was all vital to the safety and confidence of the patient and their family.

In December 1986 I sat down with my ward sister for the first assessment of my practical skills as a student nurse. I was at the beginning of my training at the London Hospital, and I had completed my first month. This was an acute medical ward with a mixture of general medical patients, mainly with chest complaints, but it was also the East End so there was a fair percentage with active tuberculosis. The other half of the beds were given to haematology patients who

[14] Nursing and Midwifery Council, *The Code, Professional standards of practice and behaviour for nurses, midwives and nursing associates,* 10.

were mostly acutely ill cancer patients with lymphomas, leukaemias and other life-threatening conditions. The latter were all receiving aggressive chemotherapy and in various stages of immuno-suppression. Apart from being an infection control disaster, this was a terrifying place to work, with the junior doctors often in tears with sheer exhaustion and the overwhelming experience of young patients dying regularly. The first death I observed was a sixteen-year-old boy who died with only nurses with him because his family were too poor to keep making the journey into the hospital. This was an intense first experience of the NHS and I felt woefully unprepared and inadequate.

I remember very clearly being very anxious about my assessment. This was not because the ward sister bore any relation to the stereotypical dragons portrayed in films. She was young, very approachable and had been incredibly supportive. I was anxious because I was very aware that as a naïve eighteen-year-old I was totally ill-equipped to provide the kind of care that these people, facing terrible futures and often horrible deaths, needed.

The tool that the London Hospital used for assessing student nurses at that time was Behaviour Assessment Rating Scales.[15] As I sat down with the ward sister in the office my expectations of my score were not high. I had to start at the bottom. However, to my amazement, the ward sister placed me at three from the top in all areas, explaining that she needed to leave space to show that I had improved by the end of the thirteen-week placement. She went on to tell me that despite my abject terror on seeing the extreme circumstances my patients found themselves in, and my young age, she felt that I had demonstrated a natural aptitude for caring which had covered my lack of experience. Looking back I wonder if the reflective practitioner in me was born in that interview.[16] The encouragement and support of that ward sister was a seminal moment in my training and one I have never forgotten — it was not always like this. I was given opportunities to learn and as a result grew in experience and confidence. Over thirty years later I can still remember those patients names and how they died. It led me into

[15] B.A.R.S as they were known were used as a way of assessing student nurses practical skills alongside the more academic assessment of exams and essays.
[16] R. Richardson, 'Humpty Dumpty Reflection, Reflective Nursing Practice', *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 21 (1995): 1044-1050.

a career of over twenty years, many of which were spent with the dying and those with cancer.

I often reflect on that experience and wonder what it was that ward sister saw in my eighteen-year-old self. There was some competence, as well as a massive gap in skills, which I spent the next three years learning and the next eighteen developing. Despite my lack of experience I was wise enough to know when to ask for help, sometimes from the patients themselves, who were experts in their own conditions. I perhaps had some natural ability to meet needs in a sensitive way even if I lacked the technical knowledge. This kept me and my vulnerable patients safe. But it also gave me the confidence and courage to learn and a very real awareness of my lack of competence in so many areas. Training in those days was a multi-disciplinary experience. In a training hospital you would learn from any of the other student nurses who had more experience than you. I would ask the doctors and later on the junior doctors would ask me as a staff nurse. Sharing knowledge was part of the culture.[17]

My initiation into ministerial training was not as clear-cut. I was shocked at the outset to be allowed effectively to serve as a minister and perform key pastoral tasks without any direct supervision by someone more qualified. While the things I was doing were not life-threatening like the tasks I had learned as a nurse, they still had the potential to bring emotional and spiritual damage if done badly. In contrast to my early days as a student nurse, no one was checking what I was doing.

As I look back on fourteen years of experience as a Baptist minister, how would I describe my competence now? Is it just an accumulation of years of just getting on with it or has something more organised and helpful occurred? After two years of Equipped to Minister[18] my most profound conclusion was that I was not equipped at all. This is not to criticise the course. As a helpful guide to those who would long to be more adept and nuanced at leading in their local church it was

[17] Nursing and Midwifery Council, *The Code, Professional standards of practice and behaviour for Nurses, Midwives and Nursing Associates,* 10.
[18] Equipped to Minister is the Lay Pastor and Preacher training provided by Spurgeon's College over 12 modules, taught on Saturdays.

wonderful. But it seemed to assume that something organised was happening at the coal-face of ministry that for me just wasn't. I went straight from that course to begin my ministerial training and many of the gaps in my competence began to be filled. However there was still only so much college could do in two days per week and our reflection groups were filled with stories of us all ministering out of a deficit of knowledge and experience. We were helping each other and of course our tutors were available, approachable and wise — but they were not there when we led that funeral or did our first wedding. I looked back on my NHS experience of 'see one, do one, teach one' as halcyon days of practical training compared with the way I was being formed as a Baptist minister. I must admit to having something of an advantage in some areas. The hospital and visiting the sick and dying was the one area I felt very comfortable and competent, but for my friends this was a huge area of anxiety. As I moved through my career I was blessed to have some wonderful role models, and their competence was obvious and demonstrated what I was striving for. I was able to see what it looked like and find my own version of it in a safe and supportive environment, but shouldn't all Ministers in Training have that?[19]

As is often the case, competence was something I was very aware of when it was missing, and which became less of an issue as I became unconsciously competent in most areas of ministry. As I gained experience in the key skills of ministry, leading people through birth, marriage, illness and death, as well as the pastoral journey of their lives, punctuated with the liturgical year and regular gathering around the Lord's table, I began to feel that sense of competence that had grown in my nursing career. In my Newly Accredited Minister years I kept studying as I felt I had gaps in my knowledge and was blessed with a wonderful mentor. My competence grew into a more expert and professional ability that freed me to concentrate even more on the people I was ministering to. Acknowledging that there is no short cut to this, nevertheless I would often look back from this place of competence with more anxiety about my ministerial training than I had had about my nursing training. In my NHS experience I was not allowed to do things that were ahead of my level of competence. I didn't give out drugs alone until I was qualified. I didn't give intravenous drugs until I had done a two-day course and passed an

[19] Goodliff, *Shaped for Service*, 46.

exam; I didn't administer chemotherapy until I had done a hospital-based course, an exam and a degree module. In contrast my first funeral and wedding were completely unassessed.

This has always troubled me, and while I am well aware that each experience of ministry formation is unique and that some, including myself later in my training, are blessed to have been supervised by some very conscientious and experienced ministers, this is not something we standardise for those training to become Baptist ministers. Professional standards in the key tasks of ministry: birth, marriage, death, and the sacraments in between, are taught but not observed regularly in practice.

Anthony Clarke's 2021 book, *Forming Ministers or Training Leaders?* has some very helpful insights into the variety of approaches to Baptist ministry formation in our colleges. His Venn diagram depicting preparation for Baptist ministry was interesting to me in what it leaves out as much as what it defines.[20]

When I first came across this diagram it seemed to articulate well my experience of formation and subsequent development as a minister. As I continued through my training, I remember feeling that with the help of the college, that I was moving towards what Clarke depicts as the

[20]Anthony Clarke, *Forming Ministers or Training Leaders? An Exploration of Practice in Theological Colleges,* (Eugene, OR: Resource, 2021), 50. I have added the word 'professionalism.'

centre of the diagram and feeling more and more at ease with my new role. But what also struck me about this diagram was that the centre had been left empty. For me this blank space was the natural home for 'professionalism', although Clarke would argue something different. In fact he would rather we avoided use of the language of profession at all:

> While professional language itself can be carefully nuanced and although the intended emphasis of professional may be on the way that the practice of ministry is accomplished — that is, well, thoroughly, competently, not in a slapdash way — an unavoidable aspect of professional language is the implied distinction and separation between those who are professional and those who are not.[21]

Moreover, Clarke goes on to say that this kind of distinction, rather than being therapeutic, actually undermines any dialectical model of ministry. I would also want to challenge this view of professional distinction. There are times in all of our lives when what we need is expert help rather than equal dialogue, but perhaps more commonly what we all need is a professional person who is confident and comfortable enough in their own skin to wear that professionalism lightly and humbly. In this guise the professional not only brings help but also maintains the dialectical model of ministry where we all learn together. In fact this ease and humility in expertise may be the very thing that, for me, marks out the true professional. I would argue not for a privileged and aloof status beyond the people we are called to serve, but rather a place where calling, spiritual development and the hard work of learning skills converged to form a professional persona. This persona is free to be unconsciously competent and skilled in the areas of ministerial life so that instead of being consumed with the thoughts of how to do a certain thing or behave a certain way, the professionally competent minister is free to be attentive to what the Holy Spirit might be saying in those same situations; to be free to engage in a spirituality of presence being fully present to the other person.

In a helpful description, Osmer outlines an ability of the congregational leader or minister fully to attend to the otherness and

[21] Clarke, *Forming Ministers or Training Leaders?,* 142.

pain of the person they are with and what God might be saying in the midst of that pain and suffering.[22] A similar idea was encouraged throughout my nursing training, where we aimed as practitioners to become 'unconsciously competent' in basic nursing tasks so that we were able to tune into the patient and their experience and emotional needs. The skill was only one facet of the interaction between patient and nurse, but it was vital that the skill was there as part of the transaction or relationship. Focusing on the skill alone will minimise that relationship but holding the skill as a part of the relationship can be liberating.[23]

Of course, setting professionalism as a goal of ministry formation in this very deliberate way does not give a standardised blueprint for what that professionalism should look like. Ronald Osborn describes the North American phenomena of a changing picture of ministerial professionalism.[24] He offers the images of master, builder, pastoral director, manager and therapist as ways of understanding how, over the centuries, ministry has formed its professional identity in response to the needs of society. In a largely uneducated, pre-industrial world the minister was a master and educator; when education and social mobility became part of the congregation's experience building new congregations and a pioneer mentality seemed to be the pattern of the professional minister, mirroring the pioneering spirit of the secular society it served.

In a British perspective, Russell describes how the clergy became more focused in their roles during the industrial revolution, as other professions took over some of the areas previously dominated by the church.[25] In more recent times we can perhaps all recognise the mantle of spiritual director, manager and therapist. These roles have perhaps contributed to our confusion about our identity as professionals. They appear to be more of a reaction to the secular world than a conscious decision on our part as ministers. In identifying with other professional

[22] Richard Robert Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 33-34.
[23] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 221.
[24] Joseph C. Hough and John B. Cobb, *Christian Identity and Theological Education* (Chico, Calif: Scholars Press, 1985), 15-16.
[25] Russell, *The Clerical Profession*, 38.

models we have, in my view, brought more confusion than clarity to the concept of professional ministers.

The suggestion that there have been three dominant models of spiritual leadership or ministry in the past seventy years — pastoral director, shepherd and spiritual guide — is made by Michael Jinkins.[26] The pastoral director model seeks to build up and equip the church, emphasising the theology of the priesthood of all believers. The shepherd presents a more traditional and biblical model which sees the church as body or organisation that needs drawing together, communicating with and standing with in good times and suffering. Finally, the spiritual guide seeks to live out the presence of the Holy Spirit in a way that brings life to the church. As all of these models present different ways of being a minister, and all of them may legitimately inhabit the professional ideal, understanding where we stand as a minister ourselves and where our churches stand in relation to these three possible models can help us to find places of mutual understanding with the church of that professional persona.

To add to an already complex picture, Barbara McClure argues that our attitude to pastoral care in our churches has changed perceptibly in the past thirty years in response to some of these concerns.[27] She suggests that the image of the professional caregiver or shepherd model has now been replaced by a much more egalitarian model of community care for each other, communal-contextual pastoral care. This model of care, as well as bringing a much keener sense of public and community response to pastoral care situations, also challenges the power relationship that the shepherd model brings. But most of us recognise that in a context where community members care for each other are there still situations that require the skilled accompaniment of a professional minister and this 'triage' approach can create a bigger divide between the ordained and non-ordained pastoral carer.

Echoing some of those anxieties, Eugene Peterson expresses a deep concern about the professionalisation of ministry in America in his

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[26] Michael Jinkins, 'Religious Leadership' in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* edited by Bonnie J. Miler- McLemore, (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 312.
[27] Barbara McClure, 'Pastoral Care' in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* edited by Bonnie J. Miler- McLemore, (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 275-77.

memoir, *The Pastor*. In the closing chapter he describes some of his concerns in a letter to a younger pastor:

> Here's a Psalm phrase that has given me some helpful clarity in the midst of murkiness: 'Blessed is the man who makes Yahweh his trust, who does not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false Gods' (Ps. 40:4) The 'proud' for me in this context are those pastors who look like they 'know what they are doing' — who are competent and recognized as such, who have an honoured position in society and among their colleagues. And 'going astray after false gods' amounts to living in response to something manageable, turning my vocation into a depersonalised job that I can get good at.[28]

The risk of this kind of self-confidence and lack of vulnerability is certainly an unattractive downside to any professionalism, but whether competence in the main areas of ministry necessarily leads to this kind of attitude is an assumption that demands a robust critique. I think that Peterson voices a fear we as English Baptists have had for centuries: that any kind of professionalisation of ministry leads to an unhelpful self- sufficiency rather than a vulnerable reliance on the Holy Spirit. This was certainly a fear voiced in the eighteenth century when training ministers became a crucial issue for English Baptists.[29] The fear that becoming competent would bypass the work of the Holy Spirit can still be detected in Peterson's words. The idea that competence and professionalism throws up some sort of barrier between a minister and the people they serve is also implied. Where professionalism merely becomes the distinction between one who knows something and the rest who don't it is indeed an unhelpful one as William Willimon asserts.[30] And yet, the very distance and depersonalisation that Peterson deplores may sometimes be what is needed as Nigel Wright explains:

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[28] Eugene H Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 315-16.
[29] Brown, *English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century*, 124.
[30] William H. Willimon, *Calling & Character: Virtues of the Ordained Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 32.

> At a painful funeral of a loved person it does not help those who grieve if ministers give way to their own grief. For the sake of everybody 'getting through' they should command their own emotions and be 'professional'.[31]

This tension between being approachable and walking with people through their life events, and yet holding a place that is set apart is, I believe, at the heart of our difficulty with professionalism in ministry. It lies behind the need to be competent and yet also fully reliant on the Holy Spirit and perhaps explains why in comparison with other caring professions we invest so little in 'in-field' training and supervision. Are we afraid of interrupting what the Holy Spirit might do by supervising practical learning and training?

At the end of my Registered General Nurse training a third of my final examination was devoted to the teaching and assessing of others, and before I could take up my ward sister's post I had to complete a degree module in teaching and assessing nurses and healthcare assistants. In contrast I do not remember receiving any teaching at college on how to pass on my skills as a minister to any future Ministers in Training I might supervise. My own training was an inconsistent experience of some exemplary and some non-existent and even damaging supervision. This kind of inconsistency does not help us to produce good ministers. In an era when time at college is getting squeezed into one day a week for most ministers in training, how we support and train those ministers in their churches is more important than ever.

This disparity and confusion around professionalism and the potential benefits of embracing our own form of professionalism in Baptist ministry is what has prompted my research. I hope and pray that this project will lead towards a kinder, more supportive form of professionalism. I believe that this will most likely require the denomination to look again at some kind of standardisation of training within the different formation paths offered by our Baptist colleges. It will perhaps be helpful to look more closely at other professions and their ability to support and train in the field, and how we can better equip experienced ministers to supervise and encourage ministers in training. But I believe we also need to look again at our professional

[31] Nigel G. Wright, *How to Be a Church Minister* (Oxford: BRF, 2018), 18.

identity as Baptist ministers; to willingly take on certain traits of professionalism that might make us more secure and improve the quality of our practice in the church and the world at large. I have four suggestions.

1. Supporting each other in intentional lifelong learning communities

A key issue in learning in any profession is whether the learning environment is safe: safe to make mistakes, safe to ask questions, safe to grow. While there has always been a muted acceptance that ministers need to commit to lifelong learning, until recently (with the instigation of the Continuous Ministerial Development programme), this has not had an organised structure. Now, with the beginning of supportive peer relationships in our commitment to lifelong learning we have an opportunity to grow our professional confidence. Being able to flag up areas that we are less experienced and confident in is the first step towards sharing skills and knowledge and can only benefit our ministers and churches.

2. Standardising training for key events in ministry

While standardisation can be restrictive it can also be liberating. Providing a standardised way of carrying out ministerial recognition interviews has been a positive experience for my Baptist Association and means that we do at least have an explicit expectation of what that process should involve across the denomination. As the key moments in ministry still provide the moments when we are most on show to the world, infant dedications, marriages and funerals, would it not be wise to ensure that a basic understanding and standard of ministry was taught and assessed by all Baptist colleges and followed through into the churches themselves? These key moments can, if done well, be helpful missional opportunities. Why would we not invest in making sure we all do them well? I cannot believe that it would it be that hard to devise a model of assessment for such moments that would give guidance and confidence to the Minister in Training and protect the public from well-meaning but ill-equipped ministers.

3. Providing support and assessment of those key tasks in the field

As I have already suggested, time at college is precious and scarce. Most of what we learn as Ministers in Training is experienced and

consolidated in the congregation or pioneering setting. And yet our provision of supervision is not routinely assessed and can be very variable in its helpfulness. Mentors provide invaluable sounding boards in the training and newly accredited phases of formation but this rarely takes the form of walking with a minister through a first funeral or wedding. Fear of being on the receiving end of patriarchal and patronising help may result in reluctance to ask for help in the future whereas training ministers to support and pass on knowledge in an empowering way could nurture the kind of professionals who are secure enough to learn from each other: which leads to my last point.

4. Training all ministers to train each other

When passing on knowledge and skills becomes a normal part of who we are, we can abandon the hierarchical pattern of teacher and learner and instead adopt the much more positive professionalism of sharing skills and knowledge. None of us will have the same experiences and all of us will have a different angle or view to helpfully bring to any pastoral situation. Becoming a profession that can share that learning together probably needs to start in the colleges but can be nurtured in ministers' groups and clusters, Newly Accredited Ministers sessions and Continuing Ministerial Development support structures, and dare I say, even in Facebook groups. I am sure that some of this does indeed happen, but I feel we must go much further. Recently retired ministers and ministers with backgrounds in teaching or other professions have a wealth of experience which could be used more widely and which we are not paying enough attention to.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would argue for a very specific form of professionalism in Baptist ministry. My own Regional Minister, Geoff Colmer, has a phrase that I have always found challenging and inspiring. He talks about the minister always being the non-anxious presence in the room.[32] This is not easy and yet I think we can all aspire to that calm presence that is able to be competent and trustworthy while still being wholly attentive to the situation and what God is saying in it. It is this professional holy space that I would like us

[32] See Geoff Colmer, 'Regional Minister Fridge Magnets', *Ministry Today* 58 (August, 2013): 17-23.

to aim for. A space gained through the hard work of training, the rigours of formation and the openness to the Spirit that these two disciplines can release. It is in this holy space that I believe we can find a new confidence and secure identity. How many of us have sat in ecumenical meetings and found ourselves the poor relation because our state church colleagues seem to hold a more professionally secure space? In these days of mistrust in institutions and government, perhaps it is the nonconformist's moment? Perhaps this is our time to step into a secure public identity and use those professional skills that we can offer people at the key moments of their lives; birth, marriage, death and loss? Even in a post-churched society, people still reach out for professional assistance at these crucial moments and a good encounter with an approachable and yet professionally competent and reassuring presence can be transformative for the people we encounter. Indeed these moments may well become the only times when most of society reaches out to us in the church and we need to make sure that we make the most of each opportunity.

But I also think that we can be aiming towards something much kinder and supportive than we have perhaps offered each other before. The various Facebook groups for ministers give us a glimpse of both the best and worst of what a professional nurturing community can offer. It should not be a place where we all moan about our lot, and yet it can be a place where we can be vulnerable enough to own our particular knowledge and experience deficits and learn from each other for the benefit of our congregations and those who have yet to join them. This kind of community learning and support only thrives when the participants are professionally secure enough to be vulnerable and honest about our own experiences or lack of them. It is a place of pastoral integrity that acknowledges that we all need to be lifelong learners and take responsibility for the next generation of ministers to come.

The word 'professional' has so many difficulties for Baptist ministers, but that elusive state of confidence with humility and vulnerability is something I believe is worth striving for. It is, I believe, the way for us to offer a much needed voice in the public sphere, through private pastoral encounters, and as we speak to the collective experience of grief and loss that the pandemic has placed us all in. It is also a way for us, as Baptists, to feel more comfortable in our own skins and hold our

own in the ecumenical conversation. And as Baptist colleges increasingly have to fight for their own existence in the complex world of further education, a professional and supportive community in our churches and among our qualified ministers is the only way that future Ministers in Training will receive the kind of training we would expect of any other professional person.

Notes on Author

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