

## CONTINUING EDUCATION A MINISTERIAL NECESSITY

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There is no such person as a 'fully trained' minister. Theological college marks only the primary stage of ministerial formation. There are many more stages yet to come, as pastors review and reflect on their ministry and discover fresh resources for ministry. In this process continuing education for ministry is a necessity.

As a denomination we have acknowledged the need for continuing education. In addition to the recommended five weeks of holiday leave, churches are encouraged to give their ministers a further week for study. Many ministers take advantage of such study weeks – as also of grants available from the Baptist Union Ministry Department. But, most do not.

This failure to engage in continuing education is surely a scandal. In a fast-changing world ministers need regular in-service training. Continual updating of personal and professional skills is a 'must'. A failure to engage in continuing education goes contrary to the spirit of David who spoke of only giving to God his best (2 Sam 24.24).

Sadly, in this respect Christian ministry compares poorly with other walks of life. In almost all professions in-service training is a necessity of life. For example, in order to be able to continue to practise as an accountant, it is necessary to do a predetermined minimum number of hours of further training a year. It doesn't matter how far one may have reached in the profession – one could be the senior partner in the largest accountancy firm in the country – one could not continue to practise without annual professional updating.

It was therefore with interest that I read one of the recommendations in *Affirmation and Accountability* presented last year by the Society of Mary and Martha to the Church of England: "Expect all clergy to undertake a minimum of 40 credits worth of learning each year, and regularly follow up any who opt out". The suggested 40 credits assumes an average value of one hour per credit: i.e. the equivalent of a week of study. The document continues: "Pride in building a personal portfolio and making skills accreditation of real value in applying for posts and doing other interesting and worthwhile tasks within the diocese might help. Disinterest in training or late cancellations of reservations may be the fault of a lazy cleric, or may be an early warning sign of depression or overload, a symptom of poor quality or irrelevant training, or lack of adequate financial resources".

I like the idea not simply of expecting ministers to engage in life-long learning, but of actually following up any who opt out. But would such a requirement for learning credits work in our Baptist denomination, which has at its heart independency? I see no reason why not. Probationary studies is now the norm – without fulfilling them nobody can become a fully accredited minister. What would happen if failure to engage in continuing education beyond the probationary period were required for one's name to be retained on the list of accredited ministers? Needless to say, were this requirement adopted, then it would involve a good deal of extra work for those who had responsibility for ministry. But if it were to result in more effective ministry, then the time and energy expended would be more than worth while.

Yet perhaps in the first place the ball is not in the court of the Baptist Union – but in the court of local churches. What would happen, I wonder, if deacons were to expect of their ministers that every year they engaged in 40 hours of continuing education, and held them accountable to that expectation?

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