

Job Specification for a Senior Minister

Ministry Today 33: February 2005

By Paul Beasley-Murray

Senior Minister of Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford

and Chair of the Ministry Today Board of Management

At the beginning of this year, I found on my desk a letter for me to sign. Addressed to my leadership team, it had been written by one of my deacons. It read as follows:

My new year resolutions are as follows:

1. I will leave all the physical arrangements for the two new 'missionary' congregations to the leadership team
2. I will concentrate all my efforts on the preaching of the word that will inspire people to want to be active in the two 'missionary' congregations
3. I will set aside time to train people to be effective leaders within the fellowship
4. I will trust the leadership team to make all the arrangements for the church's 100th anniversary, having suggested how this should happen
5. I will look forward to an exciting and relaxing year rather than a stressful year within this fellowship.

Inevitably these proposed New Year resolutions reflected something of where we are at as a church. By the time this issue of Ministry Today sees the light of day, we will have disbanded our present morning service and will instead have created two new 'missionary' congregations. Because of growing numbers attending the morning service, we felt we had to go to two services. Initially we had thought of going to two morning services. But a sizeable number of young families in the church pleaded for us to consider going for an afternoon service, because of the demands that Sunday morning activities such as football, gym, dance and drama are making upon many of our children and young people, so much so that our children and young people have been having to make a choice between church and these activities. After much debate, we decided to create a morning 'missionary' congregation meeting at the old time of 10.00am (the TENors!) and an afternoon 'missionary' congregation meeting at 4.00pm. Both congregations (note that we are not talking simply of 'services') will receive the same sermon, but the style of the rest of the service will probably eventually differ quite markedly. Needless to say, there are a host of practicalities to sort out, hence the letter given to me to sign.

Strictly speaking, all ministers should be freed of the practicalities of running their churches. Is this not what Acts 6.1-7 is all about? Indeed, in the light of this passage, one distinguished Baptist layman argued in an official Baptist publication that the deacons should do all the visiting and so enable their ministers to be free to devote themselves to "prayer and to the ministry of the Word". Personally, I think it would be disastrous if ministers locked themselves away in their studies and had no contact with people. Indeed, Rowland Croucher, the Australian pastoral consultant, suggested that "the task of the pastor is to spend half his time with God, half with people, and the rest of the time in administration! And half his people time should be invested in disciples". However, to my mind disaster beckons if a minister has no administrative skills: ministers need to be managers, as well as leaders. And yet, we must not allow management to dominate ministry.

For me, however, as a senior minister of a large and busy seven-day-a-week town centre church, the question arises, 'What is the specific role of a senior minister?' Recognising that delegation is crucial, whatever the size of the church, what are those things which senior ministers should delegate, and what are the key tasks which they should fulfil? Furthermore, for a senior minister, the issue is not simply that tasks should be delegated to other lay leaders in the church, but also what tasks should be delegated to other ministers on the staff. In this latter regard it is important that the other ministers are not treated as 'dogsbodyes' (I knew of one church where the 'assistant minister' was called 'the minister's assistant': although this was a helpful arrangement for the senior minister, it did very little for his 'assistant' who was simply a glorified PA), but rather that they are encouraged to play to their strengths. This can only happen as they are given areas of real responsibility, where they can be innovative and creative.

But not everything can be delegated. As I reflected recently on my own role as a senior minister, I felt it helpful to draw up the following 'job description':

Paul has over-all responsibility for the church's mission and ministry. In particular this means:

- * Developing a vision for the church's missionary strategy
- * Giving shape and direction to the church's worship
- * Taking the major preaching role (two-thirds of the preaching) as also overseeing the mid-week programme of teaching
- * Having general pastoral oversight of the church as a whole: in particular, this involves crisis visiting and counselling; the arrangement of rites of passage such as dedications, weddings and funerals; integrating new members (visiting new contacts, running baptismal classes as also church membership classes)
- * Training and developing others in Christian service and leadership

* Representing the church to the wider world

As I reflect on this job specification, it seems to me that a key task of any senior minister is 'casting the vision' for the church. True, this is not done in isolation from others. Indeed, in our church we have developed a small 'strategy group', which has as its brief the preparing, implementing and overseeing of a strategy for the church within a particular time-frame. However, as a senior minister I have a particular responsibility to lead the church. In order to fulfil that role, I need to set aside time to think and pray. John Wimber used to speak of how, in his pre-charismatic days, he would set aside every Friday morning to sit by his swimming pool with a coke in his hand, dreaming dreams. I believe that we have something to learn from this, even if we don't have a pool!

Similarly the senior minister is called to give leadership in the development of the church's worship. This is a role which often demands strength of character because of the conflicting demands and expectations of church members. Again, I am not alone in this task. Every Wednesday my worship co-ordinator comes to me with suggestions for the various services. Furthermore, my colleagues have input too. And yet, as the senior minister, I have the ultimate responsibility for the worship of the church, even although the leading of worship is shared. Yet, having said that the worship is shared, I confess that, if I am present, then I will always preside at the Lord's Table. For me that is a concomitant of being the church's pastor.

In a Baptist setting at least, where the call to preach is very much linked with the call to ministry, the senior minister normally takes the lion's share of preaching opportunities. He (and it tends to be he) will be expected to be 'in the pulpit' on the high days of the church's life. If I am honest, this has sometimes been an area of (understandable) tension between myself and my colleagues, for they too would wish to preach at the major services. Yet, for me, the exposition of God's word is at the heart of my calling as the church's senior minister.

Whatever size the church, ministry should always be people-related. Although at times my role could be likened to that of a 'chief executive officer' in a secular organisation, I see myself very much a pastor. Although I have to delegate much of the 'bread and butter' visiting, I still visit people myself. Just before Christmas, for instance, I did my share of taking communion to our housebound members, and thoroughly enjoyed it. I find it a privilege to minister to the dying. And in particular, I think it is important to visit newcomers in their homes. Once people have begun to attend church on a regular basis, I want to know them and the only way to know them is to meet them on their own territory. No doubt many senior ministers will think I am hopelessly old-fashioned. We are told that if pastors want their churches to grow, then they must shift from the 'shepherd' role to that of a 'rancher'. I am not convinced.

Training is a key task, which often tends to be neglected. Gordon MacDonald has written that in any given church there are four groups of people:

- * the VIPs - the church's present leaders;
- * the VTPs ('very teachable people') - tomorrow's leaders;
- * the VDPs ('very draining people') - the 'problem' people; and
- * the VNPs ('very nice people') are the solid core of the church: they are wonderful to have as part of the church, but they are unlikely to set the world on fire.

According to MacDonald, if pastors gave as much time to the VTPs as they did to the VDPs, the life of their church would be transformed! This remains a key challenge for me.

Finally, for any minister there is a representational role, representing the church in the wider community. This too is a task which it seems to me a senior minister cannot delegate.

In writing about ministry in this way, I am conscious of my own inadequacies. However, on reflection, it is all the important to receive the feedback of readers of Ministry Today. For the joy of ministering is that one is ever learning. I look forward to learning from your feedback as to how I can better fulfil my calling.