

**College of Baptist Ministers  
Monthly Newsletter January 2016**

**A book a week keeps a pastor awake  
Some reflections from Paul Beasley-Murray**

On the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my ordination I drew up a list of '25 lessons in ministry' – and then later, to mark my retirement from stipendiary ministry I expanded the list to '50 lessons in ministry' (see *Living Out the Call: I Living to God's Glory*, 2015). One key lesson common to both lists was this: "A book a week keeps a pastor awake". In other words, if pastors are to keep fresh, they must read.

Rick Warren, the founding pastor of Saddleback Community Church, is of the same opinion. In an internet article entitled *To be a great leader, you absolutely must be a reader* (published October 23, 2014) he wrote:

"If you've ever been to Israel, you know there's a real contrast between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. The Sea of Galilee is full of water and full of life. There are trees and vegetation. They still do commercial fishing there. But the Dead Sea is just that – dead. There are no fish in it and no life around it. The Sea of Galilee is at the top of Israel and receives waters from the mountains of Lebanon. They all come into the top of it and then it gives out at the bottom. That water flows down through the Jordan River and enters into the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea takes in but it never gives out. That's why it's stagnant. The point is, there must be a balance in our lives to stay fresh with both input and output. There's got to be an inflow and an outflow. Somebody has said, 'When your output exceeds your income your upkeep will be your downfall'. There must be a balance. Most Christians get too much input and not enough output. They attend Bible study after Bible study. They're always taking in but they're never doing any ministry. The problem we pastors and church leaders face is the opposite. You're always giving out, and if you don't get input, you'll dry up."

Centuries ago Solomon began his collection of proverbs by highlighting the importance of wisdom: "A wise man will hear and increase learning, and a man of understanding will attain wise counsel" (Prov 1.5 AV) – or in the NRSV translation: "Let the wise hear and gain in learning and the discerning acquire skill". It is true that in the first place these words are an encouragement to read the proverbs Solomon had collected - "There's something here also for seasoned men and women, still a thing or two for the experienced to learn" (Eugene Peterson, *The Message*). However, this injunction can be applied to the reading of books in general. Indeed, A.W. Tozer, the American Christian & Missionary alliance pastor (1897-1963) based a sermon on Prov 1.5 entitled 'Read or get out of ministry'.

Tozer in his sermon title was quoting John Wesley, who used to tell his young ministers to 'read or get out of ministry'. What's more, Wesley modelled what he preached: he always used to ride with a book propped against his saddle pommel as he travelled from one engagement to another. In this connection Tozer quoted an American Indian preacher, who encouraged his hearers to improve their minds for the honour of God by saying: "When you

are chopping wood and you have a dull axe you must work all the harder to cut the log. A sharp axe makes easy work. So sharpen your axe all you can”.

Oswald Sanders, a past leader of the Overseas Missionary Fellowship, in his book *Spiritual Leadership* (Marshall Morgan & Scott, London 1967) devoted a whole chapter to ‘The leader and his reading’, and also quoted John Wesley with approval. Sanders wrote:

“The man who desires to grow spiritually and intellectually will be constantly at his books. The lawyer who desires to succeed in his profession must keep abreast of important cases and changes in the law. The medical practitioner must follow the constantly changing discoveries in his field. Even so the spiritual leader must master God’s Word and its principles, and know as well what is going on in the minds of those who look to him for guidance. To achieve these ends, he must, hand in hand with his personal contacts, engage in a course of selective reading” (95).

It was precisely with this understanding of the importance of continuing learning that ministers used to call the room in which they worked their ‘study’. Today, however, many ministers refer to their place of work as their ‘office’ (which derives from a Latin word referring to the ‘performance of a task’ – I fear that this change of terminology points to a different understanding of ministry. As John Stott similarly reflected: “Many are essentially administrators, whose symbols are the office rather than the study, and the telephone [now we should say ‘the computer’] rather than the Bible” (*Between Two Worlds*, 124).

Ministers need to read. In the first place they need to read and study their Bibles. However, they also need to read and study more broadly. C.H. Spurgeon, the Victorian ‘Prince of Preachers’, had a large personal library and believed passionately in the importance of reading. Commenting on Paul’s words to Timothy, “Bring the books, and above all the parchments” (2 Timothy 4:13), Spurgeon wrote: “He is inspired, yet he wants books. He has been preaching at least thirty years, yet he wants books. He’s seen the Lord, yet he wants books. He’s had a wider experience than most men, yet he wants books. He’s been caught up to heaven and has heard things that are unlawful to utter, yet he wants books. He’s written a major part of the New Testament, yet he wants books.”

To return to Rick Warren, he believes that reading is vital for leadership: “Leaders are readers. Every leader is a reader. Not all readers are leaders but all leaders are readers. A lot of people read but they’re not leaders. If you’re going to lead, you’ve got to be thinking further in advance than the people that you’re leading.” Warren advances four reasons for reading:

1. We must read for inspiration and motivation
2. We must read to sharpen our skills
3. We must read to learn from others
4. We must read to stay current in a changing world

Notice too that Warren does not have in mind ministers simply reading Christian books. We need to be in touch with the world in which we live.

For most ministers none of what I have written is controversial. Yet the reality is that nonetheless many ministers fail to read on a regular basis. The old joke that you can tell the date of when a minister left college by date of the books on his shelves is in many places all too true. Books are seldom bought – and seldom read.

In my list of ‘lessons in ministry’ I suggested that ministers should aim to read a book a week. I dare to believe that is not too much to aim for. Indeed, for years I have regularly read over 150 books every year for review in *Ministry Today*. I recognise that rates of reading vary, and that I may not be typical of all ministers, but I still maintain that reading a book a week is not an impossible goal. Southern Baptist pastor Eric Geiger, who now serves as Vice President of the Church Resource Division at LifeWay Christian Resources, in blog post wrote:

“While I would not consider myself a ‘reading expert’, reading has been a significant part of my development for the last 20 years. I view reading as an opportunity to interact with great thinkers and leaders. I typically am working through multiple books at a time. Before kids entered our world, I averaged reading two books a week. The quantity of my reading has slowed for this season, but I still take reading very seriously.” (*Read or Get Out of the Ministry*, May 12 2014).

If a book a week seems too ambitious an aim, then what about this statement I came across: “Every preacher in normal health ought to read from fifteen to fifty books a year and know them”! The truth is probably that ministry would be revolutionised if every minister read at least one book a month. Sadly, not even what I would regard as the minimum is the norm. For many life seems too busy. But at the end of the day it is surely a question of priorities. If something is important, there is always time.

So how does this work out in terms of actual time? Oswald Sanders suggested that every minister should ‘determine’ (I like that word) to spend a minimum of half-an-hour a day in reading. John Stott expected more of ministers. He used to say, “Every day at least one hour; every week one morning, afternoon, or evening; every month a full day; every year a week. Set out like this it sounds very little. . . . Yet everybody who tries it is surprised to discover how much reading can be done within such a disciplined framework. It totals up to nearly 600 hours in the course of a year (*Between Two Worlds* 127).”

Stott, of course, was writing as a single man, and some might therefore argue that he failed to understand the pressures experienced by ministers with families. But this is no reason to totally dismiss his particular pattern, while recognising that every minister needs to develop a pattern which works for them. I think of a minister friend who used to get up at 5 o’clock every morning to read for an hour or so before the day began. Fred Craddock, a distinguished American Methodist, wrote: “The person who has a comfortable chair in a quiet corner beside which is always a book with a marker and who reads 20 minutes after dinner and before retiring will read dozens of books each year” (*Preaching* 79). In my own case, when as a young minister in Manchester I found myself having to travel down frequently to London for denominational committee meetings, I would always bring a pile of books onto the train and as a result got through many hours of reading. Some ministers

finding it difficult to read at home go away every year for a reading week, either alone or with a group of peers.

Although no longer in pastoral charge, I still make time to read. Indeed, I still regard myself as a 'minister in service', and therefore I feel duty-bound to continue to read and to continue to learn. Along with books, I also read several journals: two are only of academic interest, viz. *New Testament Studies* and the *Tyndale Bulletin*; however one journal is of more general interest, viz. *Ministry Today*, which as the only British journal devoted to pastoral studies should surely be read by every minister! In addition, for many years now, I have been on the mailing list of the *Grove Booklets*, which through their various series tackle all kinds of subjects relevant to ministry.

To return to my main point, 'a book a week keeps a minister awake'. Despite all the pressures upon them, ministers need to make time to read – they need to read for their own pleasure, for their own profit, and for the sake of the people they serve.