

**College of Baptist Ministers
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**Leadership and accountability in the local church
Some reflections from Paul Beasley-Murray**

Pastors are by definition leaders. Their task is to spearhead the ministry and mission of the local church. However, in Baptist churches pastors do not lead alone – they share the leadership with other leaders such as deacons and elders. In turn these leaders are accountable to the church meeting, although, the reality is that in calling a minister and in appointing deacons and or elders, the church meeting delegates much of its authority to them.

Our concern in this paper is particularly with that of the role of the pastor. The position of the pastor has always been slightly anomalous. For although called by the church and paid by the church, pastors have never been regarded as employed by the church. True when it comes to the HM Revenue & Customs pastors are treated as employees, but when it comes to the law pastors are regarded as ‘office holders’ and ultimately accountable to God alone. For this reason in the past no pastor has been able to sue a church for unfair dismissal! As a result of this position pastors have never had a contract of employment – instead they have had a letter with terms of appointment, specifying matters such as stipend and holiday leave, but often saying very little about what is expected from the pastor.

All this is in the process of change. Already as a result of change in charity law legislation, the church’s leaders (whether they be called ministers, deacons or elders) are the ‘charity trustees’ of the church. In the sight of the law, the minister is now just one of the trustees – although in most churches the minister tends to be the ‘chairman’ of the trustees. It may well be that in the not too distant future changes will take place to employment law, resulting in the loss of the minister’s status of ‘office holder’. Already some ministers are beginning to worry about this loss of independence, for they fear that deacons and elders may draw the conclusion that their task is to ‘manage’ the minister on behalf of the church.

We are hopeful that these changes to the law will not unduly disturb the good working relationships which ministers generally enjoy with their churches, and not least with their deacons and/or elders. For Baptist churches have always rooted their understanding of ministry in the Scriptures. There it is clear that ‘pastors and teachers’ are Christ’s gift to the church (see Eph 4.11) and that as such they are to be honoured (see, for instance, 1 Tim.5.17). We believe that the current promises used at the induction of a minister will remain: on the one hand, the minister promises to “lead and enable God’s people in their mission to the world”; and on the other hand, the members promise to “honour and support” their new minister.

As is often the case, there needs to be a balance in the way in which the Scriptures are interpreted. On the one hand, ministers are accountable to God for the exercise of their ministry (see, for instance, (see 1 Cor 4.1-4; Gal 1.10; Hebs 13.17), and therefore have a responsibility to exercise their ministry in a way that is responsive to the Spirit’s leading. On

the other hand, ministers also accountable to the church: just as Paul and Barnabas gave an account of their missionary activities to the church at Antioch which had set them apart for this particular work (Acts 13.1-3; 14.27), so today's pastors should be prepared to give an account of their ministry to the people of God, and not least to their deacons and/or elders who are the 'managing trustees' of the church.

As Baptists we believe in the ministry of all and the leadership of some. Perhaps this is the time for a fresh recognition that while ministers have a specialist ministry to exercise, they do so within the context of shared ministry and shared leadership. Ministers are called, for instance, to be team leaders, empowering others in the service of God. Ministers do not have exclusive rights on vision: rather vision needs to be shared and agreed together, first with leaders such as deacons and elders, and then by the church as a whole..

Significantly in the New Testament 'management' is a metaphor for ministry. The Apostle Paul, for instance, wrote: "Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards ('managers') of God's mysteries" (1 Cor 4.1), and in so doing applies it to the faithful proclamation of the Gospel. However, Jesus, when he used this metaphor applied it to the effective resources of material possessions (Luke 16.12). As 'managing trustees' the leaders of the church share a responsibility for the effective use of the church's resources in the proclamation of the Gospel. Within this context many churches will expect a greater degree of accountability from their ministers, and not surprisingly considering the large proportion of the church's resources spent on the minister. Rightly understood accountability is about trust and transparency, and not about control and power.

Examples of accountability include the following:

1. Clear job descriptions will be expected. Currently most ministers do not have an agreed job description. This may have been acceptable in the past, but this will no longer be so. Responsibilities need to be clearly defined. Clearly responsibilities will include preaching and teaching, worship and the Christian rites of passage, pastor care and mission. No doubt guidelines from the Baptist Union will be helpful, but nonetheless they will be limited. The fact is that there can be no one standard job description for a minister - responsibilities will vary from church to church, and will differ according to a minister's personality and gifting. Indeed, they can even differ at various stages in a person's minister.
2. Although ministers need to be given broad authority to exercise their agreed responsibilities, the church's lay leaders will no doubt expect regular ministry reports. Where there have been agreed goals, then there needs to be a good deal of latitude and flexibility in assessing the pursuit of those goals. Leaders need the freedom to fail so that they be willing to risk! Clearly such reports cannot include pastoral confidences, nor would they deal with the minutiae of day-to-day ministry. However, deacons and/or elders must be able to hold their ministers to account for their ministry. Such accounts will hopefully be a source of encouragement, a spur to prayer, a cause for corporate reflection, and lead to deeper commitment on the part of the deacons and/or elders to support the ministry of their pastor..

3. As part of their job description, ministers will want to make it clear that their ministry will often go beyond the borders of the local church. Some ministers, for instance, will be involved in their local community, while others will be serving God on wider Baptist or ecumenical bodies. Elders and deacons 'worth their salt' will always recognise that the kingdom is broader than the local church, and will be happy to see such wider ministries as part of the work of their pastor. However, wise pastors will want to make sure that they give regular reports on these aspects of their ministry, and so make themselves accountable to their fellow leaders.
4. Ministers may well be required to give reports on conferences they have attended, study weeks they have taken, sabbaticals they have enjoyed. Most deacons and elders are genuinely delighted to discover how their ministers have been blessed by time away from the church.
5. Minister will be expected to be like most other people and undergo annual appraisal. Because of the specialised nature of ministry, these appraisals are best conducted by an external ministerial facilitator together with two representative deacons or elders. Appraisals properly conducted can be a great source of encouragement and help.
6. Similarly now that continuing professional development is a requirement in many jobs today, ministers will be expected to give evidence that they too are committed to continuing ministerial development. Hopefully membership of the new College of Baptist Ministers with its seven-stranded on-line portfolio will be seen by churches to be helpful in this regard – and as a result deacons and elders will realise that it is in their interest to pay the annual membership fee!
7. Perhaps within the context of appraisal, churches will want to ensure that their ministers are developing a healthy work/life balance, giving time not just to preparing sermons and visiting people in their homes, but also to developing their spiritual walk with God and supporting their families. They will want their minister to observe the principle of Sabbath, by enjoying a proper weekly day of rest, by taking proper holidays, and by going on a three month sabbatical every seventh year. Churches know that it is in their interest to have a happy and healthy minister!

Ministers have nothing to fear about accountability – rather such forms of accountability are to be welcomed. All too often where relationship between ministers and churches break down, it is often because there is a lack of trust and transparency. True, there may well be some deacons and elders who may be tempted to try to manage their ministers, but with the help of a professional body like the College of Baptist Ministers, such deacons and elders can be helped to see that ministers can combine their leadership role with proper accountability.

How can accountability be built into the call of a minister? Hopefully not by the imposition of a one-sided contract, but rather by the mutual acceptance of a covenant between the minister and the church, in which not only the accountability of ministers to the church is

recognised, but also the care and support of the church is pledged to their ministers as they seek to lead the church forward in mission and ministry.¹

An example of the support and care churches might commit themselves to giving is found in *Radical Leaders: A guide for elders and deacons*. In the chapter entitled 'Pastors also need looking after', nine forms of pastoral care by elders and deacons for their minister are suggested: praying for the pastor, encouraging the pastor, defending the pastor, providing office facilities, ensuring adequate time off, paying a fair stipend, providing comfortable housing (or an adequate housing allowance), and setting up a system for an annual review of performance and development.²

Whereas a contract is about a task, a covenant is about relationships. In this paper the focus is on the relationship between the minister on the one hand, and the deacons and elders on the other hand. Perhaps there is also a place for a leadership team covenant in which all the leaders commit themselves to such disciplines as:

- Mutual care. We will model the kind of relationships that ideally should characterise the life of the church in general. We will love one another, pray for one another, honour one another, care for one another, encourage one another, and speak the truth in love to one another. We will be there for one another, come hell or high water.
- Loyalty. Outside our team meeting, we will always stand up for one another. While none of us is perfect, and there will be times when we make a mess of things, we will resist the temptation of criticising one another to other members. The place for criticism is either one-to-one or in the team meeting.
- Positivity. In our relationships with one another – and indeed with the rest of the church – we will always exude a positive spirit. We will shun negative talking and thinking. We will instead affirm one another and will speak well of one another.
- Excellence: We will never be satisfied with the second-best. In our desire for excellence we will foster a healthy dissatisfaction with the way things are and will always strive for better.
- Faith: We will strengthen one another's hope and faith in God, and we will foster each other's passion for Christ. We will be bold in the way we develop our various ministries – and where there are failures, we will help one another to learn and then to use the failure as a stepping board for fresh advances.³

In conclusion: the terms pastor and team go together as much as love and marriage. Just as in marriage, so also within the context of a leadership team, relationships need to be constantly worked at. Where there is commitment to one another, perhaps expressed through a covenant, ministers should not fear the challenges in the changing legal standing

¹ A limited example of such a covenant has been produced by the Eastern Baptist Association. The covenant is limited in that the focus is just on three specific areas: viz. "maintaining a healthy and authentic spiritual life; continuing ministerial development as part of discipleship; and taking periodic stock of ministry as a way of being accountable". In this 'care covenant' "the church agrees to support the minister in specific ways, and the minister agrees to be accountable to the church",

² See Paul Beasley-Murray, *Radical Leaders: A guide for elders and deacons in Baptist churches* (Baptist Union of Great Britain, Didcot, revised edition 2005) pp 28-31.

³ See 'Relationships are vital' pp17-19 in *Radical Leaders*; also 'Build Teams' pp163-164 in *Transform Your Church* (IVP, Leicester 2005) by Paul Beasley-Murray.

of ministers, elders and deacons. Ultimately Christian leadership is not about power, but about trust and accountability.