

ENDING WELL: THE FINAL LETTER OF THE COLLEGE OF BAPTIST MINISTERS

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Following the meeting of the CBM Board on Thursday 19 November I am writing to inform you that we have made the decision to begin the process of closing down the College of Baptist Ministers.

As you can imagine, it has not been an easy decision to make. We began with such high hopes in 2013. Yet sadly the leadership of the Baptist Union was determined to block the development of the College, believing there was no place for an independent body concerned for the wellbeing of Baptist ministers. Nor were we helped by the impact of the Government's data protection regulations, which made 'direct marketing' impossible.

However, in this letter I want to strike a positive note. We have, for instance, been encouraged to see the way in which the Baptist Union has been implementing the *Ignite* recommendations, and in that regard we warmly welcome the plans announced this September for continuing ministerial development – a matter which we ourselves had long campaigned for. As a result, although we remain as convinced as ever for the need for ministers to be represented by an independent body when difficulties arise in the church, we feel that now was the time for us to bow out.

In the words of Frank Bauman, the author of *The Wizard of Oz*, "Everything has to come to an end, sometime". Or to quote 'the Teacher': "For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die" (Eccl 3.1-2). Yes, there was a time to launch the College of Baptist Ministers, and now is a time to close the College of Baptist Ministers.

Everything – including every Christian group or organisation – has a limited life. Over the last fifty years of Baptist ministry I have been involved in starting up three organisations. The first was 'Mainstream: Baptists for life and growth', which together with Douglas MacBain I cofounded in 1978: it had a powerful influence on the Baptist denomination in the late 1970s and 1980s, but eventually it petered out. The second was the Richard Baxter Institute for Ministry (later renamed Ministry Today UK), which together with some friends I founded in 1994: it published *Ministry Today*, at the time the only British interdenominational journal devoted to the practice of ministry, but that folded in 2018. Then, as you know, in 2013 along with my friend Paul Goodliff we launched the College of Baptist Ministry with a concern for the well-being of Baptist ministers, and that too will formally close next year.

Compared to beginnings endings are not easy. Beginnings are often marked by a sense of excitement, while a sense of loss and sadness often accompany endings. That is true of the College of Baptist Ministers, for we have not been able to achieve all that we had set out to do. But then, is that not true of life in general? When the day comes for us to retire, for instance, there is often a sense of sadness associated with not being able to complete all that we felt God had called us to do.

Endings are part and parcel of life. The important thing is that we recognise the time to move on. In the words of Brazilian novelist, Paulo Coelho, "It is always important to know when something has reached its end. Closing circles, shutting doors, finishing chapters, it doesn't matter what we call it; what matters is to leave in the past those moments in life that are over". Ellen Goodman, an American Pulitzer prize winning columnist made a similar point when she wrote: "There's a trick to the 'graceful exit'. It begins with the vision to recognize when a job, a life stage or a relationship is over – and let it go. It means leaving what's over without denying its validity or its past importance to our lives. It involves a sense of future, a belief that every exit line is an entry, that we are moving up, rather than out."

As a College we want to make what Goodman called a 'graceful exit'. Rather than focus on the negatives, we want to follow Bing Crosby and "accentuate the positive". The fact is that we do have plenty to celebrate. The monthly letters, for instance, which we sent out to our members have been much appreciated. The books we were able to publish along with the resources for pastoral care have, I believe, been significant. Over the years I have appreciated the regular opportunity to give an account of my ministry through using the CMD proforma which we developed.

As a Board we want to thank you, the members of the College, who believed in our vision and so took out a membership-subscription. As a token of our gratitude we want to send you a complimentary copy of *A College of Peers*, a 'legacy' volume of almost 54,000 words in which we tell the story of the last seven years or so. However, the heart of *A College of Peers* consists of twenty-three of the letters we sent out to you. In addition, there are two longer 'in memoriam' pieces which I have written: the first on Ministry as Servant Leadership and the second on Worship seen through the lens of 1 & 2 Timothy. This is why in my previous letter I asked you to confirm with us your present address. All being well, the book will be with you by the end of February. Thereupon our activities as a College cease, and all that then remains is for us to produce a final set of accounts for Companies House.

May God continue to bless you richly in your ministry.