

## HAVE WE ‘DUMBED DOWN’ OUR WORSHIP AND PREACHING?

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In my research into how Baptist ministers experience retirement, one of my discoveries was that just over a quarter of my respondents were no longer worshipping in a Baptist church. Instead, around two thirds of that number were worshipping in Anglican churches, and another third were worshipping in a Free or independent church. <sup>1</sup>This then inspired me to do a survey of those retired Baptist ministers now worshipping in an Anglican church. <sup>2</sup>

It is very much a ‘niche’ survey, complicated by the fact that nobody seems to know (or even care?) where retired Baptist ministers eventually make their spiritual home. I wrote to the Baptist Union, but received no reply. I wrote to the principals of Baptist colleges, and received in total one name. I wrote to some other well-connected individuals, but for the most part drew a blank. To complicate matters, GPDR as interpreted by the Baptist Union and its associations means that I have no access to addresses of Baptist ministers. In the end, for the most part I have had to draw upon my own contacts.

I personally know of thirty-two retired Baptist ministers worshipping in Anglican churches. Of these, three are former principals of Baptist colleges, two are former presidents of the Baptist Union, two are former regional or association ministers, and several could be regarded as Baptist theologians. This is not to demean the others, whose faithfulness in ministry over many years I honour,

Of these thirty-two, twenty have filled in a fourteen-page questionnaire. Ideally, I would have liked all thirty-two to have filled in the questionnaire, but for the most part there are good reasons for this, which tend to be related to health issues. However, I have plenty of material to analyse – and to this I will be adding my own reflections.

In this letter I want to highlight one finding. Of the twenty who did fill in the questionnaire, five had PhDs in theology – with another having gained a PhD in another discipline prior to training for ministry. Of the twelve retired Baptist ministers worshipping in Anglican churches who did not complete a questionnaire, a further four had PhDs in theology, with another having a DMin. Putting the two together, around a third of retired Baptist ministers known to me had doctorates of one kind or another. Is that significant?

As most of you will know, I too have a PhD. Perhaps as a result I tend to be fairly laidback on being able to call myself a ‘doctor’ – for me it was simply an exercise in learning how to think critically. What’s more, I am conscious that a PhD in this country is simply a ‘junior’ doctorate – I have not attained the dizzy heights of being a Doctor of Divinity.

I am also very mindful of the dangers of today’s ‘false worship’ of the PhD. In the ‘old’ days there were many great theologians who never bothered with a PhD. At Cambridge the

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Beasley-Murray, *Retirement Matters for Ministers: A report on a research project into how Baptist ministers experience retirement* (CBM, Chelmsford 2018)

<sup>2</sup> Paul Beasley-Murray, *Entering New Territory. Why are retired Baptist ministers moving to Anglican churches? What are the underlying theological issues?* (CBM, Chelmsford 2019).

professor I most respected was C.F.D. ('Charlie') Moule, the then Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity, who had only a MA in Classics. The same was true of my PhD supervisor at Manchester: F.F. ('Fyvie') Bruce, the John Ryland's Professor in Theology, also only had a MA in Classics (albeit with a host of honorary DDs).

But with all these *caveats*, is it significant that some of our 'brightest and best' can no longer cope with being in a Baptist church? Is it true, as one of my respondents said, "the beloved Baptists have largely dispensed with sermons and theological teaching and have opted for a trivial, repetitious and irrelevant service style"? I have little doubt that such comments would not be applicable to members of the College of Baptist Ministers, but I do wonder whether in many Baptist churches there has been considerable 'dumbing down' in terms of both worship and preaching. What do you think?