

'MINISTERS' READING HABITS' *Baptist Quarterly* 49 (January 2018)

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Do ministers still read today?

Thomas Tanner began his report on the reading habits of 370 ministers of the American denomination known as 'Christian Churches and Churches of Christ' with this statement:

“For two millennia the Christian clergy has had a fascinating love affair with books and reading. From the Apostle Paul’s last request to Timothy to “bring the books” (2 Timothy 4.13) to Saint Thomas Aquinas’s warning, *Cave ab homine libri* ('Beware the man of one book'), pastors have had a passion for the printed page. But how fares the love affair today? What is the state of reading among modern ministers?”¹

The first published study of American ministerial habits by Harold Lancour in 1944 reported that “ministers, on the average, spend 18.5 hours per week on reading”, and that the subjects they read, though heavy in religion, fiction and biography, “covered pretty well the intellectual life of our culture”.²

Another major study of American ministerial reading habits was by Brewster Porcella who in 1973 painted a less happy picture, concluding that “the total amount of time devoted to reading was ten hours or less...”. He observed that reading interests among clergy tended to be rather narrowly focused, depending mostly upon the specialized, functional role chosen by the minister.³

Tanner’s survey, conducted in 1989, included the following findings:

1. Over a six month period ministers read 20.2 books of which 16.2 were ministry related.
2. Ministers spend on average of 14.5 hours per week reading
3. In terms of actual reading activity, 5.4 hours (37% of reading time) was sermon preparation; 4.6 hours (32% of reading time) was Bible reading/personal devotions; 2 hours (14% of reading time) was other ministry-related tasks, and 2.5 hours (17% of reading activity) was non-ministry readings

However, all these three surveys of ministerial reading habits were prior to the digital age, and related to ministers in the USA. As a British Baptist minister with a long-standing concern for continuing ministerial development, my interest was aroused to discover to what degree British ministers in this digital age still read.

¹ Thomas M. Tanner, 'Bring the Books': Results of a National Survey on Ministerial Reading Habits, *Journal of Religious and Theological Information* 1.2 (1993) 53-76.

² Cited by Tanner, 54: see Harold Lancour, 'The Reading Interests and Habits of the Graduates of the Union Theological Seminary', *Library Quarterly* 44 (Jan 1944) 28-35.

³ Brewster Porcella, *The Information Gathering Habits of the Protestant Ministers of Cedar Rapids, Iowa* (A PhD dissertation, University of Illinois, 1973)

To answer the question, with the help of Rev Peter Thomas and Steve Smith, in March 2017 I sent out two surveys to almost 2000 Baptist ministers, and received 309 responses to the shorter survey and 175 to the longer survey. This article contains a summary of the findings – the full analysis together with reflections is available at www.paulbeasleymurray.com/reading.

The rationale and limitations of the two surveys

Realising that the more detailed the questionnaire, the less likely ministers would be to reply to the questionnaire, I devised two surveys. The shorter survey consisted of just 14 questions together with a few optional questions relating to such matters as age, gender, and experience of ministry. I assured ministers that this shorter survey could be completed in under 10 minutes. I also said: “If you would be prepared to help us further there is a Supplementary [longer] Survey which will take you no more than 15 minutes to complete and can also be found online... Everybody who completes that survey will be offered a complimentary pdf copy of the latest edition of the journal, *Ministry Today UK*.” I knew right from the start that I could not hope for most ministers co-operating with the survey: not only did I have no official standing, but also most pastors would understandably feel that they had more important things to do. It is therefore a matter of delight that in the end I had such a good response, with the shorter survey receiving predictably more responses than the longer survey.

Accepting the industry standard confidence level of 95% for analysing the responses, the consequent margin of error (confidence interval) for the shorter survey of 309 responses is +/- 5%; for the longer survey of 175 responses the consequent margin of error is +/- 7%. Inevitably there are inherent limitations in any opt-in survey. We cannot be sure that the responses accurately reflect the whole population because those who responded are not necessarily a random sample. For example, those who read more might be expected to be more likely to choose to respond to a survey about reading. Pressures of ministry and of time, which might lead some ministers to read less, may also have discouraged some from responding. Those who respond to an on-line survey might be expected to be more comfortable with digital media and who in turn might be expected to read more through digital devices.

Most ministers enjoy reading

31% of the respondents to the shorter survey said they enjoy reading “quite a lot” – while 53% said that they enjoy reading “a good deal”. This compares with a general reading survey, with nearly half (49%) stating they enjoy reading “very much”, and a further 23% stating that they enjoy reading “quite a bit”.⁴

⁴ See *Booktrust Reading Survey 2013*, 14-15, which also points out that the AB Socio-Economic Groups are more positive about reading with a total of 85% stating that they enjoy reading either very much or quite a lot

Some ministers read a good deal

In the longer survey ministers were asked “About how many hours do you spend in an average week reading – including not just print and digital, but also articles, blogs and websites”. The following answers were received:

- 1-3 hours 12%
- 4-6 hours 19%
- 7-9 hours 23%
- 10-12 hours 20%
- 13-15 hours 12%
- More than 15 hours 15%

To state these figures in another way: just over half (54%) spend fewer than 10 hours a week reading; and almost three-quarters (74%) fewer than 13 hours.

In so far as 30 of the 175 ministers were part-timers working more than 50% for the church and a further 13 were working less than 50%, we wondered whether their responses might have brought down the average number of hours spent by the 127 full-timers.

	<i>Full-time</i>	<i>Part-time over 50%</i>	<i>Part-time under 50%</i>	<i>Part-time</i>
• 1-3 hours	12%	13%	8%	12%
• 4-6 hours	16%	27%	23%	26%
• 7-9 hours	24%	20%	31%	23%
• 10-12 hours	21%	17%	15%	16%
• 13-15 hours	7%	15%	9%	12%
• More than 15 hours	17%	8%	14%	15%

The figures were different – but clearly the part-timers were doing comparatively well.

Women ministers tend to read less than men

Bearing in mind that 78% of respondents to the longer survey were men and 22% were female, we wondered whether there would be any difference between men and women in the number of hours they devote to reading. To our surprise, in a society where generally women read more than men, we discovered that women ministers tend to read less than their male counterparts.

	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>
1-3 hours	12%	11%
4-6 hours	17%	24%
7-9 hours	22%	30%
10-12 hours	20%	19%
13-15 hours	14%	5%
15+ hours	16%	11%

To be fair, a greater percentage of women (54%) over against men (39%) are reading 4 – 9 hours a week; however, by contrast a significantly greater percentage of men (30%) over against women (16%) are reading more than 13 hours per week.

Is there an explanation for why women ministers do not seem to spend as much time reading as much as some of their male colleagues? Could it be that women read faster and more efficiently? Or are women more concerned with ‘quality’ rather than ‘quantity’? Or are there social factors, for instance relating to family, which cause women to read as they do?

More experienced ministers tend to read the most

Bearing in mind that in the first three or four years of accredited ministry, probationers (‘NAMs’) are obliged to follow a directed course of reading, we wondered whether they might be reading more than those further on in ministry. We also wondered about the reading habits of the most experienced ministers.

	<i>Under-5 years</i>	<i>Over 5 -years</i>	<i>21+ years</i>
1-3 hours	8%	13%	15%
4-6 hours	20%	16%	14%
7-9 hours	28%	23%	27%
10-12 hours	16%	20%	15%
13-15 hours	20%	11%	6%
15+ hours	8%	18%	23%

Interestingly a significantly greater percentage of probationers (20%) read for 13-15 hours compared to more experienced ministers (11% over 5 years; 6% 21+ years); on the other hand, a significantly greater percentage of more experienced ministers (18% over-5 years; 23% 21+ years) spend more than 15 hours in reading compared to probationers (8%).

Does the fact that most longer-serving ministers were probably trained as college-based students make any difference compared to more recently trained ministers, most of whom were trained as church-based students? Were college-based students able to develop patterns of extensive reading which have persisted in ministry?

Most ministers favour print books to digital reading

In the shorter survey we asked, “How often do you use a digital device in your reading?”

Almost always	6%
Most of the time	10%
About 50/50	35%
Occasionally	40%
Never	9%

Here we see that only 16% use a digital device “almost always” or “most of the time”, compared to 49% who only “occasionally” or “never” use a digital device.

We then asked a question relating to the proportion of digital and print books read in the last three months:

Almost all e-books	3%
Mainly e-books	7%
Roughly 50/50:	18%
Mainly print books	29%
Almost all print books	40%

Here only 10% read “almost all” or “mainly” e-books, whereas 69% read “mainly” or “almost all” print books. Most clearly favour print books to digital reading.⁵

Most ministers particularly favour print books when preparing sermons

Regarding Bible study and/or sermon preparation questions were asked relating to the frequency of use of print books, digital e-reader, TV/radio, down-loads, and websites, and came up with the following results

	<i>Print books</i>	<i>Digital e-reader</i>	<i>TV/radio</i>	<i>Down-loads</i>	<i>Web-sites</i>
Always	51%	7%	Less than 1%	9%	15%
Often	29%	15%	20%	32%	39%
50/50	12%	8%	17%	18%	24%
Rarely	7%	29%	46%	32%	19%
Never	less than 1%	41%	20%	11%	3%

Here 80% “always” and “often” use print books in their sermon preparation. Recognising this could be a generational thing, we turned the question around – “How often do you use a digital device for sermon preparation and/or Bible study?” and related this to age. In so

⁵ A Bible Society on-line survey of 2,294 Christians in April 2013 revealed that 8 out of 10 Christians preferred using a physical book, compared with 7 out of 10 (69%) of the public – but that was 5 years ago.

far as there were relatively few in the under 30 category, we combined the age-bands under 30 and 30-39 with the following results:

	<i>Under 40s</i>	<i>40-49</i>	<i>50-59</i>	<i>60+</i>
Always	3%	6%	5%	13%
Often	13%	19%	11%	11%
50/50	8%	6%	12%	6%
Rarely	33%	27%	36%	17%
Never	45%	41%	36%	46%

Strangely the younger generation in this regard appear to be less digitally minded than some of their older colleagues.

Ministers are more open to digital media for reading related to their personal ministry development

Regarding personal ministry development, we asked the same series of questions relating to the frequency of use of print books, digital e-reader, TV/radio, down-loads, and websites, and came up with the following results

	<i>Print books</i>	<i>Digital e-reader</i>	<i>TV/radio</i>	<i>Down-loads</i>	<i>Web-sites</i>
Always	37%	6%	2%	5%	9%
Often	41%	20%	14%	25%	33%
50/50	15%	13%	16%	24%	30%
Rarely	6%	30%	47%	34%	24%
Never	0%	31%	21%	13%	4%

Print books remain dominant: 78% “always” or “often” rely on print books for their ministry development. By contrast the percentages for those who “always” or “often” rely on other media are as follows: web-sites 42%; downloads 30%; digital readers 26%; and TV/radio 16%.

Ministers have to balance their reading

In the longer survey we asked: “Approximately what percentage of time was spent in different areas of reading?”

	<i>0-20%</i>	<i>21-40%</i>	<i>41-60%</i>	<i>61-80%</i>	<i>81-100%</i>
Personal Bible reading	64%	30%	3%	2%	1%
Reading for sermon prep	27%	49%	20%	4%	--
Other ministry-related rdng	51%	33%	14%	2%	--
General reading	52%	39%	7%	2%	--

Here we see the importance many give to sermon preparation. 49% give 21-40% of their reading time to reading for sermon preparation, while a further 20% give 41-60% of their time.

Ministers have varied patterns for their personal reading of the Bible

In response to the question “What scheme(s) are you currently using for your reading of the Bible?”, the following answers were received in the longer survey:

The Lectionary	13%
Printed Bible reading notes	19%
Online Bible notes/devotional thoughts	19%
Reading through a Bible book with a commentary	19%
Reading through a Bible book without a commentary or notes	36%
I don't have a regular pattern of reading	19%

The figures would suggest that a few ministers are using more than one scheme.

The response causing the greatest concern is that almost one fifth of ministers (19%) have no regular pattern of reading the Bible. Some of the other responses should probably also arouse concern.

- How challenging are the on-line Bible notes or devotional thoughts used by almost a fifth of ministers? What kind of printed Bible reading notes are being used by almost another fifth? Some popular Bible reading schemes amount little more to a verse or two of Scripture followed by a paragraph or more of ‘devotional’ comment.
- How stretched are those who read through a Bible book with a commentary? It was interesting to discover that a third of those using a commentary were using the light-weight ...*For Everyone series*, which are full of personal anecdotes. Half were using the ‘mid-range’ *Bible Speaks Today* series or the *Tyndale* commentaries.
- How systematic are the slightly over a third (36%) who read through a Bible book without a commentary or notes? How systematic are those (19%) who read through a Bible book with a commentary? It is all too easy to focus simply on one’s favourite books or passages of Scripture.

Should we be concerned that only 13% enjoy a rich and balanced diet of Scripture? For this is the great advantage of using a lectionary for personal Bible reading: it provides daily readings from the Old and New Testaments as also from the Psalms.

Very few ministers read the Bible in its original language of Hebrew and Greek

Two questions relating to how often ministers read the Old and New Testaments in their original languages, received the following response in the longer survey:

	<i>Hebrew</i>	<i>Greek</i>
Never – I never learnt the language	75%	39%
Never – I have not kept up the language	15%	23%
Rarely	5%	23%
Monthly	2%	10%
At least twice a week	0.5%	6%
Daily	0.5%	0%

Of those who learnt Hebrew and Greek, the percentage of those who did not keep up their languages was high: 55% (12 people) gave up on Hebrew; and 37% (40 people) gave up on Greek. The practice of reading one's Greek New Testament every day seems almost to have died out. Should we be sad to see the demise of the Biblical languages among Baptist ministers? The sobering fact is that with most now undergoing 'church-based' training rather than a full-time 'college-based' course, in future there will be even fewer ministers able to read the Scriptures in their original languages because most church-based students either do not have or do not choose to pursue the opportunity to study Greek and/or Hebrew.

Most ministers favour the New International Version of the Bible

In the longer survey we asked "What is your preferred English version of the Bible?"; and "What is your 'second choice' English version?" The following responses were received:

	<i>First choice</i>	<i>Second choice</i>
AV/NKJV	5%	8%
NIV (TNIV/RNIV)	62%	22%
RSV/NRSV	16%	20%
GNB	0%	6%
REB	0%	1%
Other	16%	42%

The 'other' responses were a mixed group: 'other' in the first question included the New Living Translation (8%) and the English Standard Version (5%); while in the second question 'other' included The Message (8%) and the New Living Translation (6%).

Since Baptists are by and large on the evangelical wing of the church, it was not surprising that the NIV and its related editions were by far and away the most popular version. By contrast the NRSV, regarded by scholars as the most accurate English version and often the

set English text in university settings, was chosen by only one fifth of ministers. Significantly the REB, the only modern British version of the Bible, has almost dropped out of use. It was also noticeable that few ministers seem to appreciate the GNB's dynamic equivalent paraphrase into contemporary language.⁶

Over the past year ministers read widely

In the shorter survey ministers were asked "In the last year what types of ministry books have you been reading?" In order of popularity of 'type' the answers were as follows:

Biblical studies	82% [of ministers]
Prayer and spirituality	66%
Theology	66%
Mission/outreach/evangelism	61%
Leadership and management	55%
Church history/Christian biography	41%
Community involvement/justice issues	36%
Pastoral care and counselling	36%
Preaching	32%
Worship	23%
Specialised ministries - children/youth/ Families/chaplaincy	17%
Other	9%

With the pressure of weekly sermons and sometimes mid-week Bible studies, it was not surprising that Biblical studies was the most popular type of book.

What is surprising is that for Baptist ministers 'prayer and spirituality' ranked second alongside 'theology'. Yet, as we have seen despite this interest in spirituality, the discipline of personal Scripture reading appears not to be strong. Or is the lack of disciplined reading of the Scriptures an outcome of some forms of contemporary spirituality? Whereas in traditional Catholic spirituality *lectio divina* has always played a key role, in some modern expressions of spirituality Scripture appears to be down-played.

As might be expected amongst a largely evangelical denomination, the reading of books on 'mission/outreach/evangelism' was relatively high (61%), but it was pleasing to note that

⁶⁶ A 2008 Bible Society survey, undertaken by the market research consultancy ComRes (and available on-line) revealed that among 'church leaders' of all denominations, the NIV followed by the NRSV were the favourite Bible versions: 37% for the NIV (compared to 62% in our survey) and 17% (compared to 16% in our survey). Among 'non-church leaders' the favourite was the NIV (26%) followed by the Jerusalem Bible (12%), read mainly by Roman Catholics.

with over a third (36%) having read in the past year books on ‘community involvement/justice issues’, Baptists have developed a more holistic approach to mission.

It was good to see that in the past year over half (55%) have read books in leadership and management, for studies have shown that effective leadership is the key to the health and growth of the church. It was strange to see the relatively low ranking of pastoral care and counselling (36%), preaching (32%) and worship (23%). That fewer ministers read about worship almost certainly reflects the way in which in many Baptist churches worship is now the prerogative of worship leaders rather than of ministers.

Male and female preferences for type of book

In the shorter survey there were no major differences between the sexes when it came to their reading patterns:

	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>
Biblical studies	13%	17%
Church history/Christian biography	6%	9%
Community involvement/justice issues	9%	7%
Leadership and management	11%	11%
Mission/outreach/evangelism	11%	12%
Pastoral care and counselling	8%	7%
Prayer and spirituality	16%	12%
Preaching	7%	6%
Specialised ministries - children/youth/ Families/chaplaincy	4%	3%
Theology	9%	14%
Worship	6%	4%

The topics of Biblical studies and theology are slightly more popular with male ministers and prayer is slightly more popular with female ministers but other categories show no differentiation by gender – for instance leadership and management books are just as interesting to women as to men.

Ministers currently read a range of ministry related books

In the longer survey ministers were asked to list up to three titles of books they were currently reading. Of the 342 books listed, the balance of books proved to be a little different from the question in the shorter survey relating to the types of books read during the past year. An analysis of the book titles shows the following percentages:

Prayer and spirituality	26% of books
Biblical studies	18%
Leadership and management	17%
Theology	15%
Mission/outreach/evangelism	7%
Pastoral care and counselling	7%
Church history and biography	4%
Preaching	3%
Worship	2%
Community involvement/justice issues	2%
Specialised ministries	0.5%

If we compare the responses to the shorter and longer survey, in the longer survey ‘prayer and spirituality’ moves from equal second to first place; ‘Biblical studies’ from first to second place; ‘leadership and management’ from fifth to third place; and ‘theology’ from equal second to fourth place.

Ministers read a wide variety of commentaries

In the longer survey we asked how many commentaries ministers “normally consult preparing one sermon”

None	3%
One	12%
Two	34%
Three	32%
Four	8%
Five or more	11%

Much as it might be ideal for ministers to use three or more commentaries, it is encouraging that 85% use two or more. To have only one commentary available on the Scripture for the day must surely be limiting.

Questions were also asked regarding which British and North American commentary series ministers tend to consult:

Apollos Commentary OT/NT	12%	Serious ⁷
Bible Speaks Today (IVP)	59%	Mid-range
.. For Everyone OT/NT (SPCK)	38%	Popular
New International Greek Text Commentary	16%	Serious
Tyndale OT/NT (IVP)	37%	Mid-range
Other	59%	

⁷ ‘Serious’ commentaries are those where the commentator is grappling with the Hebrew or the Greek.

IVP NT Commentary	38%	Mid-range
Interpretation (Westminster Knox)	25%	Mid-range
New International Commentary OT/NT	41%	Serious
OT/NT Library (Westminster Knox)	4%	Serious
Word Biblical Commentary OT/NT	48%	Serious
Other	24%	

It is encouraging that over half (59%) use the *Bible Speaks Today* series, which is a great commentary for preachers. It is also noteworthy that almost half (48%) use the Word Biblical Commentary, which devotes one and often more volumes to each book of the Bible, and which although an academic commentary is also concerned for application.

Ministers do not just look to commentaries to help with their sermons

Sermon outlines

On a scale of 1 (never) to 5 (always) in the longer survey the question was asked: “How often do you read printed/digital sermon outlines to help you in your preparation?”

1 (Never)	38%
2	32%
3	17%
4	7%
5 (Always)	6%

To what extent using somebody else’s sermon outline connects with the Biblical idea of the ‘prophet’ as one “to whom the word of the Lord came” (Jeremiah 1.2) is questionable. Preaching preparation involves listening to Scripture, to the voices of culture, and to the needs of the congregation.

Lectionary Notes

On a scale of 1 (never) to 5 (always), the question was asked: “How often do you use Lectionary notes on the readings for the day to help you with your preparation?”

1 (Never)	65%
2	20%
3	9%
4	2%
5 (Always)	4%

In so far as most Baptist ministers do not use the Lectionary, the number of those using Lectionary Notes is almost certainly much lower than in the more liturgical churches.

The internet

Another question asked was “How many hours do you tend to spend on-line researching for a sermon?”

NONE	10%
Less than 1 hour	32%
1-2 hours	31%
2-3 hours	13%
3-4 hours	8%
More than 4 hours	6%

Googling the internet for a quotation or illustration may explain in part the almost one third (32%) who spend “less than one hour” on-line “researching”. The quality of theological material on the internet, however, tends to be limited, with the result that it raises questions on how just over a quarter (27%) spend two or more hours on the internet “researching” for a sermon.

Ministers look not just to books for their ministry-related reading

A series of questions were asked in the longer survey relating to other ministry-related reading. In every case the significant response comes at the beginning of the responses – ‘NONE’. A large proportion of ministers do not seem to be keeping up with developments in ministry.

Journals/magazines

In answer to “What ministry related journals/magazines do you subscribe to?”, the following responses were received:

NONE	59%
<i>Baptist Ministers Journal</i>	26%
<i>Expository Times</i>	1%
<i>Ministry Today UK</i>	6%
Scholarly journal	3%
<i>Theology</i>	2%
Other	22%

'Other' included BMS magazines, *Church Times*, *Faith and Thought*, *Practical Theology*, and *Reviews in Religion & Theology*.

On-line ministry related mailings

In response to "How many on-line ministry related mailings do you receive?", the following answers were given:

NONE	29%
One	14%
Two	24%
Three	14%
Four	3%
Five or more	16%

On-line ministry related/theological websites

In response to "What British on-line ministry related/theological web-sites do you access?", the following answers were given:

NONE	44%
Christian Today	11%
College of Baptist Ministers	2%
Evangelical Alliance	22%
Ministry Today UK	4%
Theos	7%
Other	12%

'Other' included Baptist Union of GB, Bible Hub, BMS World Mission, Church Pastoral Aid Society, David Pawson, and Journal of Missional Practice

We also asked: "What North American ministry related/theological websites do you access?" and received the following responses:

NONE	53%
Alban Weekly & Duke	1%
Hybels & Willowcreek Assoc	10%
Christianity Today & CT Pastors	17%
Church Leaders	10%
Leadership	11%
Other	21%

Christian/Ministry blogs

18% indicate they follow at least one blog, of whom 11% named more than one. Some others occasionally read blog articles but do not 'follow' any. 60 different blogs were named of which around one third are from beyond the UK.

Ministers are buying books – but some could buy more

In the shorter survey the question was asked: "Roughly how many books do you use in the course of ministry have you bought in the last three months or so?"

None:	9%
1-2 books	31%
3-4 books	25%
5 or more	35%

Over a third (35%) had bought five more books in a three-month time frame – this suggests that in a year over a third of ministers buy more than 20 books. On the other hand, just under one in ten bought no books; while almost another third bought just one or two books in that three-month period.

Most ministers borrow books

An alternative to buying books is borrowing books. In the longer survey we asked: "How many ministry-related books have you borrowed (from friends or a library) or have used in a library during the last year?":

None	40%
A few	39%
Around 5 – 15 books	13%
More than 15 books	8%

Significantly more had borrowed books (60% in total) than had not (40%). Just over a fifth (21%) had borrowed more than 5 books.

Most ministers keep in touch with issues beyond the church

How do ministers relate their preaching to the wider world? In the longer survey we asked: "Which of the following do you read?"

Daily paper – printed	21%
Daily paper – digital	26%
BBC or equivalent website	78%
News & analysis magazine: e.g. Economist	14%
Personal interest or hobby magazine	29%
Popular magazine – general interest	4%
Other	7%
NONE read	6%

Although 80% look at the BBC web-site or its equivalent, to what extent that represents in-depth awareness is questionable. Similarly, although almost half (47%) say they read a daily paper, we do not know the degree to which those newspapers represent the serious end of the market.

Many ministers spend time reading non-ministry related books

In the longer survey the question was asked: “How many non-ministry related books have you read in the last six months?”

None	8%
1-5 books	51%
6-10 books	19%
11-15 books	8%
16-20 books	6%
More than 20 books	8%

It is noteworthy that the 51% who only read 1-5 non-ministry related books in the last six months are balanced by another 51% who read 6 or more books.

A second question in the longer survey asked: “What kind of non-ministry related books have you read in the last six months?”

None read	7%
Biography/history	47%
Business/self-improvement	13%
Novels/thrillers	70%
Poetry	14%
Hobbies/science/technology	32%
Other	13%

A later question in the longer survey asked: “Approximately what percentage of these [reading] hours was spent [in a week] in reading non-ministry related books?”.

0-20%	52%
21-40%	39%
41-60%	7%
61-80%	2%

It is encouraging that just under half (48%) in the shorter survey spent more than 20% of their time reading non-ministry related books. This compares with the average of 17% of time spent reading non-ministry related books (on average 2.5 hours a week) by American ministers in Tanner’s survey.⁸

Restrictions ministers face in reading may be more complex than assumed

Time and other priorities

In the shorter survey we asked: “What restricts your ministry-related reading?” A variety of reasons are given:

Demands of ministry	46%
Other priorities	25%
Time management	15%
Not a reader	2%
Other	12%

That almost two-thirds (71%) are restricted from ministry-related reading because of “demands of ministry” and “other priorities” is significant. That time is also an issue is made clear by the response to the question: “What would help you to develop your ministry-related reading or research”:

More time	61%
More money for books	12%
Knowing what to read	10%
Other	17%

The implication is that three-fifths would read more if they had “more time”. However, to return to the question “what restricts your ministry-related reading?”, it could be argued that the 15% who referred to difficulties of “time management” might have made an even more significant response. Good time management involves ministers setting priorities, which once set give the freedom to say ‘no’ to many of the demands made upon them.

The response of the 25% who cited “other priorities” for restricting their reading may also be significant - for the presumption is that there are other tasks which take priority over

⁸ Tanner, 60.

reading and study. But is that so? Clearly if someone is dying or has just died, then a minister will want to drop everything and be there with the person. However, in the overall pattern of a minister's life, the spiritual discipline of reading and study is a key priority.

Money and Knowing What to Read

Although mentioned by only 12% of those responding to the second question, "money" is an issue. Significantly Tanner in his survey noted that "those with a book allowance read significantly more than those without".⁹

It was a little surprising that for 10% "knowing what to read" was an issue. However, in this information age for some there may be just too many books to choose from with the result that they just give up. On the other hand, the answers to another question in the shorter survey, "What are the major influences in your choice of reading of materials you use in your ministry?" seem to indicate that reviews are less important than recommendations from "friends" and "Christian leaders" – although the dominant factor in purchasing books was clearly the need for a sermon series:

Recommendations of friends	63%
Reviews in the on-line <i>Baptist Times</i>	5%
Reviews in other journals and magazines	34%
Recommendations from Christian leaders	46%
Spring Harvest of other Christian conferences	14%
Facebook	10%
Need: e.g. for a sermon series	73%
Other	23%

Many ministers do not set aside specific time in the week for reading relating to ministry

In terms of "How much time are you able presently to set aside for reading related to your ministry?" (i.e. not general reading such as novels or poetry), the figures in the shorter survey present a different perspective:

- None 2%
- Irregular – as opportunity arises 53%
- One session – about three hours 24%
- Two sessions – about six hours 18%
- One day a month 5%

⁹ Tanner, 'Bring the Books', 68.

Here we see that only some 42% are able to devote specific time to reading, and even then it is no more than 6 hours a week. Is this failure to find time to read linked with the increasing trend for ministers to have ‘offices’ rather than ‘studies’? Or is it related to many today not being able to safeguard every morning for study, and instead engaging with people at morning activities such as a toddler group or a church café.

Most ministers do not avail themselves of a reading week

In the Baptist Union’s recommended terms of settlement, ministers are entitled to a week of study or reading. Bearing in mind that during the year just over half are unable to set aside specific time for reading relating to study, one might think that most would be keen to take advantage of the yearly reading week. However, this is not the case.

In answer to the question, “Over the last three years or so how many reading weeks (or equivalent) have you taken?”, the responses of the 300 ministers replying to this question in the shorter survey were as follows:

None:	56%
One:	15%
Two:	10%
Three	20%

This decision not to take advantage of a reading week stands in contrast to one of the ordination questions asked of past generations of ministers: “Do you promise to be faithful in prayer and in the reading and study of the Holy Scriptures, and to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called”.¹⁰ In the most recent Baptist manual, *Gathering for Worship: Patterns and Prayers for the Community of Disciples* that is absent in the main ordination promises, although an expanded version appears in the ‘Additional Material’ section: “Will you endeavour to lead a godly life... and will you be diligent in prayer, in reading the Scriptures and in all the studies that will deepen your faith and ministry”.¹¹ If ministers do not feel it important to take an annual reading week then we might wonder how seriously ministers feel it is to grow and develop in their thinking and understanding of their calling. Or is there a problem with churches not taking seriously the need for ministers to have a reading week?

¹⁰ Ernest A. Payne & Stephen F. Winward, *Orders and Prayers for Church Worship: A Manual for Ministers* (Baptist Union of Great Britain & Ireland, London, 4th edition 1967) 219.

¹¹ Christopher J. Ellis & Myra Blyth, editors, *Gathering for Worship: Patterns and Prayers for the Community of Disciples* (Canterbury Press, Norwich 2005) 131.

Churches can do more to help ministers buy books

In the longer survey we asked: “How much help did you receive from your church last year to buy books/journals?”

Nothing:	54%
Under £50	13%
£51-£100	13%
£101-£200	8%
£201-£300	8%
Over £300	4%

It is concerning that over half (54%) receive no help to buy books or journals; and that of those who do receive help 13% received less than £50, and a further 13% received only somewhere between £51-100. If only churches realised that it is in their own interest to be generous in the help they provide to ministers in purchasing books. Without books ministers lose their cutting edge. Furthermore, without commentaries, sermons become platitudinous and lacking in content.

ENCOURAGEMENTS, CONCERNS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Encouragements

There is much to encourage

- Most ministers (in the shorter survey) enjoy reading
- Most (in the shorter survey) are reading a wide range of ministry-related books
- Most (in the longer survey) keep in touch with what is happening in the wider world

Around half of ministers in both the surveys are in my judgment doing well

- 53% (in the shorter survey) enjoy reading “a great deal”.
- 47% (in the longer survey) read 10 or more hours a week
- 85% (in the shorter survey) normally consult two or more commentaries in preparing a sermon: a good number of these commentaries fall into the mid-range or serious group of commentaries.
- 45 % (in the shorter survey) availed themselves of one reading week over the last three years.
- 42% (in the shorter survey) specifically set aside at least one session a week to reading
- 41% (in the longer survey) subscribe to at least one ministry-related journal or magazine

- 66% (in the longer survey) have access at least one British on-line ministry related/theological web-site, and 47% access at least one North American on-line ministry related/theological web-site

Around two in five ministers in both the surveys are in my judgment doing particularly well

- 27% (in the longer survey) read 13 or more hours a week
- 22% (in the longer survey) read more than 11 ministry-related books in the last six-month period – roughly two books a month
- 20% (in the shorter survey) availed themselves of a reading week every year for the last three years
- 19% (in the longer survey) normally consult four or more commentaries in preparing a sermon
- 18% (in the shorter survey) set aside two specific sessions a week (6 hours) to read

Concerns

Not all is well, however. We should be concerned that

- 59% (in the longer survey) do not subscribe to a ministry-related journal or magazine
- 56% (in the shorter survey) have not availed themselves of a reading week in the last three years
- 53% (in the longer survey) only read irregularly (as opportunities arises) – and 2% never read
- 44% (in the longer survey) do not access any on-line ministry related website
- 36% (in the longer survey) have less than 250 books
- 31% (in the shorter survey) bought two or less books in the last 6 months – and 9% did not buy a book at all
- 21% (in the longer survey) read six or fewer hours a week
- 19% (in the longer survey) don't have a regular pattern of reading the Bible
- 12% (in the shorter survey) normally use only one commentary for sermon preparation – and 3% don't use any commentary
- 8% (in the longer survey) have not read a ministry-related book in the last six months
- 7% (in the longer survey) have not read a general book in the last six months

We should also be concerned that:

- so many (in the longer survey) who learnt Hebrew and/or Greek never or rarely open a Hebrew and/or Greek Testament
- 54% (in the shorter survey) received no help from their church in the last year to buy books – and a further 13% received less than £50.

Recommendations

Ultimately it is in the hands of every minister to take personal responsibility for their own personal growth and development. One way would be to take advantage of the eight-stranded programme for personal continuing ministerial development offered by the College of Baptist Ministers. However, Baptist associations and churches have also a role to play in helping and encouraging ministers to read, learn, grow and develop.

The Baptist Union of Great Britain and its associations have a role in speaking to churches about ministers' priorities, helping churches understand how important it is for ministers to have time and money to read and study.

Continuing Ministerial Development needs to become an urgent priority in the life of the Baptist Union. Despite the *Ignite* report,¹² most associations are doing very little in this area. This needs to change. Ministers need to be helped to continue to grow and develop in their understanding and practice of ministry – and this in turn means that they need to be encouraged to continue to read widely and deeply.

Continuing Ministerial Development needs to be on the agenda of local churches, who have a key role in encouraging their ministers to keep learning. What a difference it could make if deacons were to take an interest in their ministers' reading – not with a view to beating their minister with a stick, but to offering help and encouragement.

A minister's annual 'review' (or 'appraisal') of ministry can provide a great opportunity for churches to ask their ministers to give an account of their reading and learning over the past year. What books, for instance, have they enjoyed reading? What insights have they discovered? What has distracted them from their reading?

The annual review of ministry could also be the context in which churches talk about the annual reading week. How did this year's reading week go? When will the next reading week be taken? What areas of ministry would the minister wish to explore? Churches need to recognise that if ministers are to take a week off for reading, then they cannot be expected to preach on the Sunday – help also needs to be given to ensure that routine pastoral work during the reading week becomes the responsibility of others in the church

Spiritual direction/accompaniment needs to be an essential part of every minister's life. All ministers need to have some form of spiritual accountability, not least about the daily disciplines of prayer and Bible reading. That too should be on the agenda at every minister's annual 'review': not in the sense that ministers have to give an account of their spiritual walk to their churches, but rather that churches know that their ministers have a 'soul friend' to whom they can turn. Churches need to encourage their ministers to set aside

¹² *Ignite: Investing in Leaders* (Baptist Union of Great Britain, December 2015).

time on a regular basis to see their 'spiritual director' as also to encourage their ministers to go on retreat from time to time.

Churches should be encouraged to give realistic financial help toward books and software for their ministers, for ministers are more likely to read when a church provides the necessary finance. Churches could also be encouraged to pay subscriptions to bodies such as the Baptist Ministers Fellowship and the College of Baptist Ministers, recognising that money they invest in continuing ministerial development always blesses the church too.

Theological colleges could do more to help their students with their reading habits, helping not just with reading skills, but also with time management, and coping with emails, Facebook and other pressures arising from the use of social media.