

'Retirement makes a new stage in ministry', Baptist Ministers Journal 346 (April 2020) 30-32 by Paul Beasley-Murray

My earlier article 'Retired Ministers Matter' (*Baptist Ministers Journal* October 2019) summarised some of my findings on how Baptist ministers experience retirement, published in *Retirement Matters for Ministers* (College of Baptist Ministers, 2018). To my great interest the January edition of BMJ contained two responses viz. 'Retirement and ministerial identity' by John Colwell and 'Retired ministers: free to serve!' by John Claydon. The Editor has kindly allowed me to write a reply.

John Colwell argues that if we understand ministry as a 'call to do' (the so-called functional position), then our ministerial identity terminates at retirement; whereas if we understand ministry as a 'call to be' (the so-called ontological position) then retired ministers retain their calling. As I made clear in my research report, *Entering New Territory: Why are so many retired Baptist ministers worshipping in Anglican churches? What are the underlying theological issues?* (College of Baptist Ministers, 2019) I am unhappy with this argument. The very terms of the debate reflect a very different cultural context from what we find in the New Testament, where leaders were set apart through the laying-on-of hands to a particular task: see my in-depth study of 'Ordination in the New Testament' in *Anyone for Ordination?* (MARC 1993). Paul Goodliff in his major study on this issue (*Ministry, Sacrament and Representation*, Regent's Park College, page 152) said that "we cannot 'just read the Bible' and ignore the intervening years", but I am not convinced. The danger of the 'ontological' position is that it leads to ministers have a special 'status' (as distinct from 'role') which is essentially the Anglican and Roman Catholic understanding of priesthood. If Baptists are to be true to their heritage and be 'radical believers' who root their theology in the Scriptures, then they have no other option than to accept that a have a functional approach to ministry.

Our calling to be 'ministers of the Gospel' (a term I much prefer to 'ministers of the Word and Sacrament', which reflects a Reformed rather than a Biblical understanding of ministry) does not end when we draw our pension. We may no longer lead a church, but we remain 'ministers of the Gospel'. In my next book *Fifty Lessons in Ministry: Reflections on Fifty Years of Ministry* (DLT, autumn 2020), I have adapted the model of ministry developed by Bruce and Kathryn Epperly as follows:

1. Springtime: The first congregational call, marked by adventure and tests of integrity.
2. Summer Midcareer in ministry, with challenges of endurance and new opportunities for transformation.
3. Autumn: Retirement and the adventure of exploring ministry without leadership responsibilities.
4. Winter: The final season of living out God's call, marked by weakness, but also by inner renewal and integrity.

Or to express these stages of ministry without the seasonal analogy:

1. The years of youthful energy and enthusiasm (25-45 years).
2. The years of growing maturity (45-65+years).
3. The years of wisdom and fruitfulness (65+ years -).
4. The years of contentment and letting go of everything but Christ.

Retirement marks not, as John Claydon suggest, the moment when we “lay down the office of ministry”, but the beginning of a new third stage of ministry. Recognising that the average life expectancy of ministers is five to seven years longer than others (so John Ball, COE of the Church of England’s Pension Board) and with most Baptist ministers retiring at 65, this means there are likely to be many years of ministry ahead of us. Indeed, Camilla Cavendish has argued that middle age only ends when we are 74 (*Extra Time: Ten Lessons for an Ageing World*, 2019). True there does come that final stage where ‘being’ is no longer accompanied by ‘doing’, but that depends less on age and more upon health. Regional ministers and local pastors need to recognise the enormous potential that retired ministers have to offer and be pro-active in supporting them in their ministries.

Retirement is a time when we are free to take new initiatives in ministry. It is an opportunity to serve God not on a church’s terms, but ‘on our terms’. This, however, does not necessarily mean, as John Claydon suggests. we serve “without accountability”. As a member of the College of Baptist Ministers I give an account of my ministry every time I update my Continuing Ministry Development profile.

When I was ordained on 10 October 1970, I was set apart not to be a ‘pastor’ but to be a ‘missionary’. The Great Commission was at the heart of my ordination, and within less than a week I was on the high seas bound for Congo. True, I spent over 34 years of ‘stipendiary’ ministry in leading two churches, but I spent eight years in theological institutions helping to equip men and women to be ministers of the Gospel. Much as I believe that the local church is ‘the cutting edge of the kingdom’, I have never equated ministry with leading a church.

I retired from stipendiary ministry at the age of 70. Although I no longer have the same energy levels I had when I was ordained at the age of 25, I still have a passion to ‘live out the call’ that God has on my life. In part this is done within a local church where amongst other things I am often expounding the Bible seminar-style as also leading a home group. In the context of the wider church I preach, teach, mentor, and write (in addition to my weekly blog I have written eight books in the last five or six years). In the wider world I chair a Cambridge alumni group, I have been president of my Rotary club, I belong to a political party, I am a patron of young adult’ hospice, and when I have time I act out the role of a demented patient in our local medical school. All these activities are aspects of ministry. So too are the dinners I get invited to because of Caroline (a senior coroner), where often I am called upon to say grace and always am involved in conversations about the Christian faith. My involvement with my eight grandchildren is also an extension of my ministry: indeed, it was because of them that I wrote *This is my story: a story of life, faith and ministry* (Wipf & Stock 2018).

Of course, I recognise that what I have described is just my way of living out God's call. Other retired ministers live out their calling in many other ways, so more church-based and others more community-based. There is no one pattern for ministry in retirement. What is important is that we seek to be faithful to the call that God has on our lives.

In my most recent book, *Make the Most of Retirement* (BRF 2020), a guide to retirement for ministers, there are four main parts. Part 1 deals with 'Beginning a new journey' where I encourage readers to 'enjoy the new adventure'. Part II, 'Finding new purpose' includes advice such as 'be secure in your real identity'; 'don't just hand out the hymn books'; 'keep your mind fresh' and 'become a sage'. Part III, 'Living a full life', has sections on 'relax and play', 'keep fit and walk', 'make new friends'; 'reconnect with old friends', 'tell your story', 'share your faith' and 'discover yourself'. Only in Part IV, 'Preparing for the final journey', do I write about 'rise to the challenge of being'; 'learn contentment'; 'acknowledge your mortality', 'keep on believing', 'put things in order', 'thank God for his goodness'; 'let go of past hurts' and 'letting go and holding on'.

I don't like the English word 'retirement' for it has such negative connotations. According to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, to 'retire' means to 'withdraw', to 'retreat', to 'give ground', to 'cease to compete'. In one sense that is true: retirement does involve a leaving of an office or of employment. Yet, it is also about new beginnings and new opportunities.

A poem which sums up my experience of retirement is *The Terminus*, written by David Adam, the former Vicar of the Holy Island of Lindisfarne.

"The Terminus is not where we stay,
It is the beginning of a new journey.
It is where we reach out beyond,
where we experience new adventures.
It is where we get off to enter new territory,
to explore new horizons, to extend our whole being.
It is a place touching the future.
It opens up new vistas.
It is the gateway to eternity."

One thing for sure, retirement is not the end of ministry, but simply marks a new stage in ministry. Louis Armstrong, the great jazz musician, said: "Musicians don't retire; they stop when there's no more music in them". That too is how most retired ministers feel. We still have divine music in our souls and we will only stop giving voice to that music when we join the greater chorus in heaven! The God who called us into ministry still has a call on our lives.

Paul Beasley-Murray lives in Chelmsford and can be contacted at paulbeasleymurray@gmail.com. See also www.paulbeasleymurray.com.