

TERMINATING MINISTRY: AN ISSUE WHICH HAS YET TO BE DEALT WITH

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On 11 August 2005 *The Baptist Times* published an article entitled 'Terminating Ministry' in which I argued for the appointment of a "minister's advocate" when relationships break down between a minister and the church. Fifteen years later the problem I exposed has yet to be resolved.

Let me quote from the first three paragraphs of my article:

Yet again another minister friend has bitten the dust. At a special church meeting a vote of confidence in the minister was put – and was lost. So with no further ado, and certainly without any expression of gratitude for past service, the minister was 'booted out'.

What should we do when things go wrong and relationships break down between the minister and the church? Call in the regional minister? Yes, certainly. But regional ministers have limitations, because they have the care of both the church and of the minister – so when things go wrong, they are most likely to allow the interests of the church rather than of the minister to take precedence (see John 11.50). Along with the regional minister, it seems to me that there should be a minister's "advocate" who can represent the minister's interests. As another minister friend, who was voted out of office, admitted to me: toward the end of his ministry, the pressures upon him were such, that with hindsight he realises that some of his words and actions were unwise. Had there been someone standing alongside him, things could have been so different.

But the saga is not over once the minister has been 'dumped'. In the first place, there the minister has needs which must be met. Here I have not in mind not the inevitable financial needs (which should in part be addressed by a just financial settlement), but the emotional and spiritual needs which arise from the inevitable pain and the confusion. All too often ministers in such situations are left bereft of all support. To my mind, neighbouring ministers have a real role to play, although ideally there should be some professional support in place to enable the minister concerned to work through the trauma of termination.

Sadly, I could have written penned that article yesterday. Ministers continue to 'bite the dust'. Even in these last six months two of my friends have had their appointments terminated, and there are many more friends who in the intervening fifteen years have had the same experience. For those of my readers who think I just have the wrong kind of friends, let me draw upon my research report *Retirement Matters for Ministers* (College of Baptist Ministers 2018). There I told of how I conducted seventeen face-to-face interviews with retired Baptist ministers to learn something of their experience of retirement. Because I felt I needed time to 'connect' with each minister, I began by asking them to tell me about their experience of ministry. To my amazement, I discovered that almost each one of them had had at least one tough experience of ministry. To quote from the report:

“Drawing upon the literary style of Hebrews 11. I wrote: ‘By faith they set out in ministry not knowing where the journey would lead them – by faith they lived in homes not their own – by faith they offered up their wives and children in the service of God – by faith they climbed the mountains, but also plumbed the depths of human experience – by faith they preached the good news and lived out the life of the kingdom – by faith they saw their churches grow, but they also saw their churches decline – by faith they experienced the love of their people, and by faith they experienced rejection and misunderstanding.’ Listening to their stories, I was overwhelmed by a sense of respect and admiration for these ministers who had known some of the highs, but also some of the lows in Christian ministry. I remember the day, when in the morning one minister had told me of how he had been effectively forced to resign from one church – and then in the afternoon listening to another minister tell me how he had been sacked from one church and then had to resign from another church. Neither of these men were in my judgment problem ministers – rather they had encountered problem churches – and all too often problem leaders. In the course of such ministries, many had been wounded – but in the words of the title of book written many years ago by Marjory Foyle, they had been ‘honourably wounded’. Sadly today these ‘heroes’ are unknown to most today – but thankfully they are ‘known to God’.”

Yes, relationships continue to break down between ministers and their churches. Not surprisingly, into such situations regional ministers are called in to help resolve the difficulties. However, although regional ministers carry a prime responsibility for the care of ministers, there are limits to what they can do. For when regional ministers are called into a troubled situation, they have to be there for both the church and the minister. Yet at times it is impossible for them to balance the conflicting responsibilities. The church may feel the regional minister is on the side of the minister, while the minister may believe the regional minister is on the side of the church. Not infrequently regional ministers side ultimately with the church for the simple reason that the survival of a church is more important than the survival of an individual. Hence my reference in my original article to the words of Caiaphas in John 11.50: “It is better for you to have one man die for the people than for the nation to perish”.

Ministers need a supportive friend whose sole purpose is to be there for them and to see that the minister is treated fairly. Yet this does not normally happen. I think, for instance of a situation where relationships had broken down and as a result of all the ensuing tension the minister had to go on sick leave. Nonetheless, a meeting was called and his presence was demanded. On arriving he found that lined up against him were fifty people ‘baying for his blood’. Nobody was there to sit with him, and certainly nobody was there to speak up for him.

This is not right. In most other working situations, where things have gone wrong and dismissal is threatened, a union official is called in to represent the employee to ensure that their member is treated fairly. The underlying principle here surely needs to become the norm in Baptist churches.

Furthermore, even where ministers are clearly in the wrong and admit their behaviour has been ‘unbecoming’, they still need someone to speak and act on their behalf, to ensure that

they are fairly dealt with. We see that in our courts, for instance, where even the worst of criminals have a barrister to represent them. That is part of our country's 'justice' system.

My experience is that there are times when Baptist churches treat their minister unjustly. Churches take advantage of the fact that their minister is not an employee but an 'office holder', knowing that as a result ministers cannot sue a church for unfair dismissal, for in the eyes of the law God is their employer. Not surprisingly an increasing number of ministers have become members of the Faith Workers' Branch of Unite. But this is not an ideal solution – not least because when unions are involved the focus is on 'rights' rather than on helping a minister to leave in a dignified as well as a fair manner. Although there may be some exceptional circumstances when a minister has no other option, my own conviction is that for Christians to resort to the courts goes against Paul's teaching in 1 Cor 6.1-8.

What Baptist ministers need is not a trade union but a recognised association of ministers independent of the Baptist Union, which will offer non-adversarial peer support for ministers in difficulties. Since 2014 there has been such a body, the College of Baptist Ministers. Unfortunately, the leadership of the Baptist Union prefers not to recognise the College of Baptist Ministers, convinced that the regional ministers are best suited to represent the interests of ministers. But, however well-meaning they are, regional ministers inevitably are constrained by their circumstances.

In saying this, I am not seeking in any way to denigrate the role of regional ministers. Where there are difficulties between ministers and their churches, I agree that the regional minister should be their first port of call. Yet there often comes a time when ministers need a dedicated 'advocate'. This is particularly true when ministers find themselves engaged in proceedings that may place them in a disciplinary situation with the Baptist Union. Similarly, when allegations relating to the safeguarding of children or other vulnerable persons are made and the Baptist Union has to stand apart from the accused, a friend outside the structures is needed to stand by them. In this latter respect I have two minister friends, who were found not to have been guilty of charges, yet who until they were cleared (and it took months) received no support of any kind from their regional minister.

However, I would not wish to give the impression that an 'advocate' is only needed when the charges are grave. 'Advocates' can play a role whenever there are difficulties between a minister and the church. Indeed, I am convinced that if external support were to be put in place at an early stage in a dispute, then some, if not many, problems could be resolved and ministries could be saved.

In conclusion: for the sake of fairness ministers need 'advocates' who will stand up for them and speak for them when they are in a dispute with their church. When relationships break down they need peers who will be allowed to stand by them and support them – whatever.