

Disability and ministry formation

An article written by David Beech, minister of Scarisbrick New Road Baptist Church, Southport, for the Baptist Ministers' Journal – October 2014



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by David Beech

As I write this article I do so with a somewhat amusing, yet slightly unnerving news story playing in my mind. Have you heard the one about the pilot whose prosthetic arm became detached as he was landing a plane? We are usually only told about these incidents long after they happened, perhaps wisely. I will return to this story later.

What happens when we sense the call of God to change direction, pursue a new challenge or enter a new chapter? It happens for many of us on a regular basis and we implement those things without a great deal of upheaval to our lives. Sometimes though, the call of God may lead to a more radical, fundamental change. This happened for me 10 years ago, having spent 18 years in local government. I clearly yet unexpectedly felt the call to ministry. It both excited me and terrified me.

I had long believed that I would enter full-time Christian service and, having spent a number of years in lay leadership roles within my local church, ministry could have appeared to be the next logical step. Once I began to sense that call I started to wonder whether this what God had spoken to me about all those years ago. I tested the call by sharing it with a few people and it seemed to be affirmed.

The prospect also terrified me. Having left school 20 years earlier with no qualifications, I was daunted by the prospect of going back to study. The other reason for my hesitation was my physical disability. Do people 'like me' become ministers? Did I fit the profile of a ministerial candidate? Would I even be considered? We were both in well paid jobs, had moved into a lovely home and were quite settled. So I did my best to ignore this sense of calling and carry on with my life.

Five years later and these ideas about ministry had not disappeared, but rather been forgotten about. Once I began to be specifically challenged about it for a second time I decided to explore the call further with my regional minister. 'It just doesn't go away' is something I remember saying to him when we met. So began the journey through ministerial recognition committee, college interviews and on into ministerial formation. As I offer some thoughts from this journey, I need to also state that I can only speak from my own experience and perspective and that these thoughts are not meant to be in any stereotypical.

Ministerial recognition interview. Having been assessed in the pulpit by a member of the ministerial recognition committee I was invited by the association for interview. It was a largely positive experience and the staff and panel were keen to ensure my disability was not a barrier. I do recall being asked a question about how I thought my disability could affect my ability to be a minister. While I was not personally perturbed by the question, I was conscious that it was not the sort of question I would expect to be asked at an interview.

Accepting that ministry is not like a job in the same sense that my roles in local government were jobs, I have reflected on this point. In many areas of recruitment, this question would not have arisen. In my case I had already spent months of personal reflection weighing up the call in relation to my disability.

College interview. I remember my two-day college interview at Northern Baptist Learning Community very clearly. Having previously visited the college it was obvious that the premises were accessible for my particular needs and that using my wheelchair around the site would not cause any real difficulty. I was asked to do

nothing that I felt I could not fully participate in and was fully integrated into the group and the interview process. I received a very warm welcome and felt accepted and included by all the staff. In no way did I detect being singled out for special treatment or attention.

Church placement. The church was told that their new minister in training was someone with a physical disability. I have never once detected from anyone any particular disquiet about my mobility issues. In fact it is fair to say that I have received what only can be described as a warm welcome from everybody.

There is a phrase used in the world of work these days about employers being expected to make 'reasonable adjustments' for employees with physical disabilities. During my first week at the church I met with the deacons to discuss any such adjustments that might be needed for me to perform my duties effectively. The only real adjustment needed at that stage was that I had been in the habit of using a breakfast bar stool from which to preach. This has become a semi-permanent fixture at the pulpit and I now also use a stool from which to lead communion.

We have needed adjustments at the manse also, but never has my disability caused a problem with my congregation or my ability to minister. The fact that I have now been called to become the full-time minister is testament to the fact their main concern appears to be whether or not I am a good minister. Surely this is how it should be.

College life. So what about ministerial formation itself? There are always tensions about balancing church work and study, but that is no different for any of the colleagues I have had the pleasure of studying with.

Academically I quickly realised that I was managing workloads and maintaining the standard of work that was expected. This meant that for me there was never any question of additional support being required, even though I knew it was available. Only twice did I have to formally request extensions to submission dates for pieces of work due to ill health. That said, extensions were granted to a variety of people and for a variety of reasons. Even people without disabilities get ill.

During my time at college I have perhaps only twice been disappointed that I was asked to sit out activities that had been arranged in group sessions because I may have found them 'difficult', and I admit to having found this disappointing. Hospitality and welcome seem to me to be a central theme in the gospels and maybe these activities will be restructured or thought through in different ways to be more inclusive. Apart from these two instances my physical disability has never been an issue. This is great credit to the staff and students, past and present, at the college, who often enough seemed to make sure that I took my turn in being included in a variety of ways in college life, playing a full and active role.

There are the usual questions about whether there are enough disabled parking spaces and adequate toilet facilities for those with disabilities, but this comment would be levelled at any number of locations up and down the country. Still, I believe this to be something that Christian organisations should take seriously.

One observation I did make at my final college review in the early summer was that part of the process of ministerial formation included courses on gender and racism awareness but nothing on disability awareness. As a member of the Baptist Union Disability Justice Group I am bound to say this seemed odd. Going back to my earlier comment about hospitality and welcome, and given that most of our churches have a number of people with a variety of disabilities or age-related conditions, I think ministerial candidates must be encouraged to think about disability issues in the context of church life during their formation.

Theological reflection

To this point I have offered personal experiences and reflections, and I now want to offer some theological reflection. Fundamental to my understanding of how anyone gets recommended for ministry, is that initial sense of calling to serve God. This call is of course a personal matter and, while it is imperative that the calling should be tested, what occurs in the heart of any individual to get them to this point is to do with the stirrings and promptings of the Holy Spirit. It goes without saying that anybody who makes application for ministry ought to

be treated with dignity, sensitivity and respect as the calling is tested.

As I remember, as well as the call being tested, another part of preparation for ministerial formation is the need to assess someone's ability to learn. So those who satisfactorily demonstrate an appropriate call and an ability to learn are likely to be accepted for formation. For Baptists this means those from different backgrounds regardless of race, gender or disability, which is consistent with the teaching of scripture. 1 Corinthians 12:12–31 speaks of the body (the church) being made up different parts. No parameters are given to exclude those with particular God-given gifts being called to various acts of service within the life of the church, including ministry. I am reminded of Peter justifying in Jerusalem his actions at Cornelius' house, after realising that God makes no distinction. Acts 10:34-35 says, 'Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him".' This is a good model for those exploring their gifts.

While reiterating that any call to ministry must be tested, and selection and formation definitely does that, we have a clear mandate from scripture to take care not to exclude.

I have already alluded to the fact that Jesus' ministry was often about tackling prejudices and preconceptions, and as ministers of God's word we have a responsibility to do the same, in our own lives and attitudes, in the church and in wider society.

Concluding thoughts

I am glad that the 'people like me are not suitable for ministry' mindset did not overrule me. I am delighted that I kept hearing that call and, with the encouragement and validation of those around me, that I came forward for ministry.

Of course in an ideal world, we would not need to write or read articles like this. However, I do feel there is probably still work to be done so that those actively or passively marginalised by society are given level access to explore their gifts and callings in the life of the church—including ministry. The Baptist Union has a good recent history in making the possibility of ministry open to all. Yet I challenge and encourage us all to continue to make those opportunities as smooth and accessible as they can be.

As I consider briefly again the incident of the pilot, I think of some potentially catastrophic consequences. Gladly, nothing untoward happened. My disability has never led to any catastrophic consequences in ministry—neither would it or should it. There continue to be many challenges and perhaps some of those challenges are particular to me and my physical disability. With a good team around me we will continue to work them through and look forward to being the best minister I can be.

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