

Ministers' resistance against professionalism puzzles me

By Paul Beasley-Murray

The other day I was with four other ministers when one of them raised the issue of professionalization in ministry. To my utter amazement two of the ministers almost hit the roof as they vehemently decried such a concept. For them the idea of being a professional was anathema.

As far as they were concerned, they were accountable to God, and to God alone. They would certainly not be willing to be accountable to a professional body which might have expectations in terms of continuing ministerial development. And as for having to go through an appraisal process which might make them accountable to a group of deacons or elders, they would rather resign from ministry.

The other three of us tried to tease out why our fellow ministers were so hostile to this concept of professionalization. Theological principles apart, it seemed to me that there were two underlying issues. In the first place, there was a feeling that there was no time for going on a course or reading a book – for them the pastoral demands of their churches were all-consuming. People needed to come first, formal learning of any kind was very much a secondary issue. In the second place, there was a feeling that deacons or elders not only could not understand the issues involved, but also could not be trusted to understand.

I confess that I was – and remain – puzzled by my colleagues' strong resistance to professionalism. I believe it to be misplaced. For surely professionalism, with its insistence on minimum standards, is all about giving our best – and in a Christian context, about giving our best for God. There is nothing unspiritual about professionalism. Professionalism involves whole-hearted commitment to Christ and his church. To my mind a lack of professionalism in ministry is more often than not a mark of laziness rather than of unspirituality. 'I will not offer burn offerings to the Lord my God that cost me nothing' said David (2 Samuel 24.24) – such a spirit is the spirit of a true professional.

The cry that 'we do not have time' for learning has no substance. It is not a question of time, but rather a question of priorities. True the issue of time management is also involved – as also the willingness to share our ministry with others in the church. I am conscious that I am blessed in being part of a ministerial team – but the reality is I am leading a church of almost 400 members and probably a church fringe of a further 400

people, while my two colleagues were pastoring churches of around 85 and 45 members respectively.

Nor for me does the argument 'we cannot trust our deacons' hold much substance for me. Maybe I have just been incredibly blessed in my thirty-three years of being in pastoral charge of a local church, but I have never felt I couldn't trust my deacons. True, I think there is a lot to be said for having an external ministerial facilitator present when an appraisal is taking place – there are issues which deacons or elders may not be able to understand – but for me, trust is not the issue.

Sadly my two ministerial friends are not alone in their hostility towards professionalism. I wonder whether the only way to overcome such resistance to professionalism is to use different language. Maybe, for instance, instead of promoting professionalism as such, we need instead to promote 'health and well-being in ministry through the development of a fitness programme which will enable ministers to grow and develop, and ultimately complete the ministry to which God has called them'. For professionalism rightly understood is not just about blessing others, but about blessing ourselves!

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