

Ministry and History: A Survey of Over 300 Religious Practitioners

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Abstract

Recognising that the nature and the activity of the Church are in part defined by its history, this study investigates the degree and type of engagement in history by those who lead ministry in the local church. How is their interest in history, if they have any, expressed? Do they feel adequately trained to use history in their work? Does history have a particular relevance to different areas of their ministry? Is the historical religious building a valuable resource or a burden? From the responses certain patterns emerge, influenced by - among other factors - age, experience and gender. Denomination also plays a significant part both in what areas of church history seem relevant and in how such history can be used in ministry. This study raises again the question of how the church brings together its theology and its history.¹

Keywords: History; Ministry; Building; Denomination; Heritage; Age; Gender.

Introduction

At present, history is back in fashion. The media is feeding a public enthusiasm, much of it in the form of entertainment on prime-time television. Schools in the UK are actively encouraged to teach history as a measure of academic ability and to bolster national identity.² Activities described as ‘public dissemination’ and ‘knowledge exchange’ are part of the policies of university history departments as they expand the subject outside academia and attract new sources of finance to maintain their viability. For the Church, history with its clear theological dimension in terms of biblical and ecclesiastical traditions never went out of fashion. No denomination can ignore its history, not least because it provides the account of their revelation of truth, and therefore the justification for particular doctrine and practice. However, for some in the Church, including ordained ministers, history can be a burden, especially when the ecclesiology it engenders is fossilised and becomes

¹ This survey began as preparation for the Open University conference in 2013 entitled *Contemporary Religion in Historical Perspective: Engaging Outside Academia*, and was developed over the following two years.

² History is a popular subject in secondary education, and is one of the English Baccalaureate options.

irrelevant in a contemporary context, or when the historical building absorbs inordinate attention and resources and in return only provides an impractical space heavily encumbered with nostalgic symbolism. History, when not understood or critically harnessed, can frustrate ministry.

During 2013-5, contact was made with 610 ordained religious practitioners in a range of denominations working at the local level in the UK.³ They were asked to complete a survey about their interest and formal engagement in both general and religious history, and how this relates to their professional lives. Several took the opportunity to elaborate on their answers with ideas and examples. Also, questions about background, including age, gender, academic attainment, and stage in career, were part of the enquiry, so as to establish any patterns of response from different groups of practitioners.⁴ This study builds on the extensive and illuminating research into the diversity of religious practitioners and their approaches to ministry related to factors such as ecclesiology and psychology.⁵ However, this research is the first of this size in the UK or elsewhere to investigate the attitudes and use of history by this professional group. As such, it raises some important questions: Do such practitioners have an interest in history that directly relates to their ministerial role or Christian life? Which elements of history were explicitly part of their academic and vocational training - and has their understanding of history developed as a discipline? Where and how has history been useful in the practice of ministry? More specifically, has the historical building been a fruitful resource in ministry and if so how?

Most respondents chose to remain anonymous in completing the questionnaire, but several made extensive comments that have been useful in explaining and expanding their views. The response rate of nearly half was high for an unsolicited survey, indicating - despite significant variation between denominations - the interest and relevance in the whole issue of history and ministry.⁶

Interest in history

The vast majority of the 302 respondents expressed an interest in 'general history', an all-embracing term to include past events, whether religious or not. Regular interest, defined as weekly activity, was expressed by 67 per cent, occasional interest

³ The method was to send a questionnaire to 610 ordained clergy and ministers on the published lists of 5 denominations (253 Anglican, 160 Roman Catholic, 97 Methodist, 66 Baptist and 34 United Reformed Church) working in local churches in parts of the West and East Midlands. The main survey was preceded by a trial across a sample in Nottinghamshire after which questions were adjusted and clarified. With a response rate of over 49 per cent (302 made up of 124 Anglican, 58 Roman Catholic, 64 Methodist, 40 Baptist and 16 United Reformed Church) this can be considered a representative sample, recognising the limitations of the questionnaire method.

⁴ The 302 respondents were asked to categorise themselves into three age categories (15 were under 40, 175 aged 40-59, and 112 were 60 plus), five levels of academic attainment in history (96 had none, 101 an O level/GCSE, 54 an A level, 33 a degree and 18 were history postgraduates) and three career stages (51 in early, 136 in middle and 115 in late). 63 of the respondents were women (21 per cent).

⁵ Such as the work of Leslie Francis at Warwick University and others.

⁶ The response was highest among the Methodists (63 per cent), and lowest among the Roman Catholics (36 per cent). There was no significant gender bias in the response rate and it is not possible to show if age, academic attainment or career stage had any effect.

by 30 per cent, and only 3 per cent said they had no interest in general history at all. Even if it is assumed all the 308 who did not respond to the survey were disinterested this still leaves almost half of all religious practitioners actively engaged in history in some way. Recognising that the term 'interest in general history' is vague and hard to quantify, this figure is probably higher than in the population in general, and may reflect the background of those involved in the survey. Religious practitioners are a comparatively older section of society in Britain and are generally educated to a higher academic level. Regular interest in general history was highest among 58 Roman Catholics (79 per cent; none expressed no interest at all) who were the denominational group within the survey with the highest average age. Similarly, interest in general history was higher among all other groups with higher average ages: the 60 plus group (73 per cent), men (71 per cent), and those in late careers (71 per cent).

The study investigated further how the interest in general history was expressed, suggesting five different activities. The most popular was 'watching historical programmes on TV', an activity of 79 per cent of participants. The percentage was higher among the United Reformed respondents (100 per cent), the Baptists (84 per cent), and the 60 plus group (81 per cent), while lower among the Roman Catholics (66 per cent).

The second most popular activity, 'reading academic history books', was the pursuit of a large minority of 46 per cent, but a majority among the Roman Catholics (60 per cent), those in late careers (56 per cent), the 60 plus group (54 per cent), and men (51 per cent). It was significantly lower among the Baptists (39 per cent), who as a group had fewer academic qualifications in history, which may indicate a direct correlation. The most academically qualified group was the URC practitioners, a quarter of whom held a degree and half of whom claim to engage in historical research.⁷

Another minority activity, 'reading historical novels', was chosen by 41 per cent, but was higher among women (47 per cent), the Anglicans (47 per cent) and the Baptists (46 per cent), but lowest among the Methodists (22 per cent). The least popular activities were 'listening to history radio programmes' at 30 per cent - highest among the Roman Catholics (40 per cent) - and 'doing historical research' at 27 per cent, but even lower among women (14 per cent).

The focus of interest in general history, primarily historical programmes on TV, reflects a trend in the wider population to consume what is termed 'popular history': a branch of history often criticised by academic historians for its emphasis on narrative and an over-simplified approach. It has been dismissed as 'comfortable, unchallenging nostalgia-fodder.'⁸ Whether or not this is a fair criticism of popular history, there were some religious practitioners in this survey who certainly took their interest in general history to be far more than mere entertainment. Some saw a clearly defined theological role: 'it helps to counter the obsession with the contemporary' wrote one and another valued it as an antidote to 'a disposable throw-away society.' 'I see history as a way of listening to God' was one response,

⁷ The number of URC respondents was 16 and thus too small for generalisations.

⁸ Department of History, University of Sheffield, <www.historymatters.group.shef.ac.uk/popular-vs-academic-history>, last accessed 28th June, 2016.

while another respondent saw engagement in history as a positive forward-looking exercise: 'it is a tool to help us plan the future with confidence.'

When narrowing the field to religious history, interest from the practitioners was reduced but still shared by a large majority at 70 per cent - higher among the Roman Catholics (79 per cent), and those in the 60 plus group (75 per cent). It was lower among women (54 per cent) and the Methodists (64 per cent) who, perhaps significantly, were the two groups least interested in general history as well. One practitioner wrote: 'I am constantly amazed at the level of ignorance - even among ordained clergy - of a lot of basic church history.' The answer he suggested was a good 'church history primer.' Another regretted 'the alarming level of ignorance [of church history] in the media and the Church.'

There would seem to be a relationship between interests in general history and in religious history, but there is a significant difference as well. Over a quarter of respondents declared an interest in general history but not in religious history, suggesting that it was just a recreation activity. The high numbers who watch history TV programmes underlines this. In contrast, the focus for religious history was often vocational, usually regarded as part of the job: 'I am only interested in religious history in as far as it informs my ministry,' was a comment that was typical of several responses. Religious history is clearly used to inform and sustain particular ministerial interests, and the examples given included ecumenism, Celtic Christianity, biblical studies, liturgy and the relationship between faith and politics. For some, history was a way of making sense of the present condition of the Church by reference to a previous era: one stated 'I am interested in early Methodism and its current decline.' The assumptions in such an approach - not least that there is an unbiased and realistic appraisal of the Church in the past and that it can easily be translated into practical models for the Church in the present - will always need to be challenged. Others saw the potential in Church history to regulate and stifle rather than inform and empower: 'history needs to let us interpret tradition and make it living history now!' and 'when history and tradition are venerated it prevents today's Church changing.'

History as part of training

History was included in the ministerial training of the vast majority of the 302 respondents at 88 per cent; it was particularly high among the Roman Catholics (96 per cent), but lowest among the United Reformed respondents (75 per cent). It was also higher in the 60 plus group (91 per cent) and those in late career (90 per cent), which may suggest a decrease in the place of history in recent training.

A majority of 62 per cent of those who had studied history as part of their training considered it to be 'useful in ministry'. This was highest among the Roman Catholics (87 per cent), those in late career (68 per cent) and the 60 plus group (71 per cent), but lowest among the Methodists (44 per cent). Also, men (66 per cent) found it more useful than women (51 per cent). One Baptist minister expressed the minority view: 'It has been good to have a broad sweep of religious history but it has not played any significant part in 30 years of ministry.' In contrast a Roman Catholic priest of a similar age said religious history was 'far more important than I would have imagined as a student.' There was for a few respondents considerable regret that the training in history was inadequate: one described the experience as 'very

limited – far too limited - we had one eight week lecture series and did one assignment.’

When asked to describe the focus of the history in their training a strong denominational emphasis in many cases became apparent, though seemingly wide-ranging and vague ‘Church history’ courses predominated. The period usually designated Early Church was common to most, as was the Reformation. Methodist training invariably involved the eighteenth century Revival, sometimes apparently exclusively so. This imbalance may account for the low regard for the relevance of religious history by Methodists (44 per cent) and some comments suggesting it is under threat, including ‘I feel it is essential that religious history should remain a significant part of pre-ordination training, and fear for its future in Methodism.’

Gaps within religious history as part of training were very evident: the centuries between the Early Church and the Reformation, the seventeenth century, the eighteenth century (except among the Methodists), and the twentieth century, apart from some regard for the ecumenical movement. Interestingly, only one Roman Catholic specifically mentioned Vatican II, perhaps because it was considered as too recent. Not unsurprisingly, no one expressed a wider perspective than Christianity itself: religious history was considered to be entirely about the Church.

A review of the current ordination training on offer in Britain reflects the findings of this survey.⁹ History as a subject is only explicitly part of about half of the training courses and in most of these cases just as an option. Only in four courses is history a compulsory element, and exceptionally in one course summary history is referred to as a ‘key discipline’ on a par with biblical studies, doctrine and practical theology. Where history is included it is often not as a separate subject or module but linked to another area of study to provide an introduction or background material; there are modules on the ‘history of theology’, ‘biblical history’ and in one case ‘the history of theologians in the past’, which it is hoped is more than a series of potted biographies. As revealed by the respondents a significant number of courses include an element of denominational history, the account of the origin and development of a particular church. Here it would seem that history is being used to outline and rationalise a denominational identity, which is perhaps an increasingly important function in an ecumenical era where many candidates for ordination training may be less rooted in a particular tradition than before. What is not apparent in the ordination training on offer is the degree to which history itself as a discipline is studied, that is how much time is given to historiography. Without this history courses may amount to an uncritical and simplistic view of past events, which is the experience of some of the respondents. Although ordination training is by necessity focused on practice and often quite short, the lack of history as part of the courses is regrettable.¹⁰ For instance, nowhere is there a mention of the theology of history, the interrelationship between the two disciplines and how this greatly affects, amongst other things, our understanding of the nature and form of ministry.

⁹ Information was obtained from the prospectuses and course specifications of 27 institutions in Britain that train religious practitioners for the ordained ministry in the churches represented in this survey.

¹⁰ The Methodist Church has re-structured its ordination training and the Church of England has re-organised the validation of courses, which does present opportunities to establish Church history as an essential part of their ministerial education.

Relevance of history in ministry

All the practitioners approached were active in local ministry and usually in charge of one or more churches. Some had additional roles such as chaplaincy but the prime focus of their work was ministering to congregations. They were asked to record how history was relevant in four main areas of ministry: 'pastoral care', 'mission and outreach', 'education' and 'worship'. It was left to the respondents to define these areas according to their own understanding and this was generally revealed in the answers given. From the responses, clear patterns emerge determined by denomination, age, and gender. As would be expected it is apparent in the responses to all aspects of the survey that there is a direct correlation between personal interest in history and how relevant it is in ministry in general.

In the first area entitled 'pastoral care' only a minority of 44 per cent thought history had any relevance. There were large differences according to denomination and gender: the Roman Catholics (75 per cent) thought it most relevant while the Anglicans (34 per cent) thought it least relevant, and men (49 per cent) found it more relevant than women (29 per cent).

History was thought useful in providing a background and context to pastoral care, either individually in the form of personal life stories or collectively in the form of local community histories. This was seen as an essential way of listening to and thus understanding people and places in order to successfully offer ministry, a process that has been referred to as pastoral ethnography.¹¹ In this survey it became apparent that the history that needs to be heard might be recent experiences or events just beyond living memory. One respondent wrote that history 'helps me be sensitive to those of other traditions and relate to older people.' Others stated that understanding local history 'in an area of decline is important in developing the self-esteem of the people,' and 'it puts current personal challenges in perspective.' History, wrote others, helps 'particularly with regard to conflicts,' and in the 'healing of historical wrongs.' One Methodist regretted that the pre-1932 divisions of his denomination were still apparent in his churches and only by recognising this could progress in ministry be made.

Several practitioners looked to history to provide advice on the practice of pastoral care. One Anglican was 'very appreciative of the Pastoral Model of ministry in the history of the Church of England,' and a few directly referred to George Herbert. In other denominations, some looked to the work of Richard Baxter's *The Reformed Pastor* for inspiration.¹² One respondent stated 'learning about the old Methodist Class system is vital to Methodism,' and another wrote 'awareness of the tradition of women preachers enables appropriate pastoral care of existing women and men preachers.' There is no doubt that turning to history for models of pastoral care is useful but without a full understanding of the historical context of such models there is a danger of creating an unrealistic ideal. A pastoral care approach based purely on the work of Herbert or Baxter or on the revitalisation of Wesley's

¹¹ For a further explanation see M. C. Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2008).

¹² Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (CreateSpace, 2011).

class system could ignore some of the pressing issues in twenty-first century ministry and as such be detrimental.

In the second area of ministry entitled 'mission and outreach' just under half of the respondents (49 per cent) thought it had relevance. One stated 'the history of the church is an integral part of our outreach programme,' and another wrote 'most people link in easily with the past, are curious and like to share their own experiences.' More men (51 per cent) found it relevant in this area than women (40 per cent). It was highest among the Anglicans (53 per cent), and lowest among the Methodists (42 per cent). The higher Anglican percentage may relate to their use of historical buildings, and certainly within the area of mission and outreach there was a clear link to structural heritage. 'Twelfth century buildings attract people,' stated one, and many others listed opportunities to reach people through school visits, genealogical enquires, local history exhibitions and tourist contacts. Several stated that people were drawn to the church for baptisms and weddings because it is an historic building. Conversely, others saw this as distracting: 'I keep getting contacted by people researching family history,' and 'it is presumed I know the history of each church building, as if that is the most important thing.' As most historic church buildings in Britain are within the care of the Church of England, this particular exasperation was limited to the Anglicans.

However, history has relevance in mission and outreach in the way past events, whether perceived accurately or not, affect the image of the Church. Several wrote of the need to 'put the record right' and to 'avoid the mistakes of the past', listed by one as 'crusades, colonialism, and the activities of the early missionary societies.' One Baptist stated 'probably the history of the church puts people off Christ, so explanations are helpful,' and another respondent wrote of the inaccurate and destructive historical images of the Spanish Inquisition and the dealings of Pius XII with the Nazis. More positively a few referred to good models of mission and outreach available from past eras such as the Evangelical Revival and twentieth century Christian Socialism. Most recognised the power of history to shape how the Church is seen in both the positive and negative senses.

History was relevant to the third area of ministry entitled 'education' according to 69 per cent of practitioners. The percentage was highest among the United Reformed respondents (81 per cent) and lowest by a margin among the Baptists (68 per cent) and the Anglicans (67 per cent).¹³ Many wrote of links to schools, where Church and biblical history help in their role as a teacher, leader of assemblies, chaplain and school governor. History is seen as a vital part of courses that train confirmation candidates, new members, and lay ministers. 'I use history as the enrichment of the Catechesis,' stated one and another wrote of its use in instructing 'converts'. The didactic quality of history is utilized more generally in gatherings such as Lent and Bible study groups. 'I teach church history as part of discipleship,' said one and another proclaimed that 'in debates and discussions it can afford enlightenment and the dissipation of prejudice and downright error.' For some history plays an important role in teaching denominational identity, particularly among the smaller denominations whose distinctive heritage may be

¹³ The URC response was too small and may not be generalised, particularly where they differ considerably from other groups.

under threat: 'I teach about the history of Methodism to remind people why we are different' was one response.

History was considered most relevant in the fourth area of ministry entitled 'worship' with 77 per cent making this direct connection. It was highest among the United Reformed respondents (81 per cent) and the Methodists (80 per cent), and lowest, though not by much, among the Baptists (73 per cent) and those in late career (74 per cent).

By the number and type of comments offered worship comes across as an area of contention. There is no doubt about the importance of the link with history expressed by some respondents: 'we see faith as heritage, so worship is shot-through with the sense of purpose – bringing the heritage of salvation to worshippers now.' History is used to both underline tradition and justify change. There are specific denominational patterns in the responses. Several, particularly among the Anglicans, referred to the way history shows the necessary continuing development of liturgy: 'it is about understanding what worship is and can/should be,' and the 'Church has always wrestled and argued about how to do it.' History is seen as a powerful catalyst since 'being aware of historical traditions gives a much more secure base from which to innovate,' and 'it is important to understand a congregation's roots and journey, especially when introducing changes.' There were a few references to the Book of Common Prayer by the Anglicans, usually in a positive tone, but traditional worship was not always seen as enlightening: 'it can be a millstone' declared more than one.

Other denominational differences emerge: Roman Catholics were more concerned about the context of worship in the past - as a key to how it has developed - and made several references to the stories of the saints, particularly local ones, as an important element in worship. The power of tradition expressed in the liturgy was very evident in these answers. In a similar way but with a different focus the Methodist, Baptist and United Reformed practitioners emphasised the value of the tradition of hymns with the direct link to historical characters who had helped to establish and spread the faith. One described singing hymns as the way to 'bring the past alive.' Within the same churches there was also an emphasis on preaching as a central part of worship, both as an historical tradition to maintain and a way to recount the historical record. One wrote: 'I sometimes quote sections of sermons preached years ago because they speak powerfully to people still.' As already noted the use of history in this way demands a careful approach.

The historical building as a resource

The final area of enquiry was the church building. Of the practitioners, 35 per cent said they had no responsibility for an historic building of any sort; this was highest among the Baptists (68 per cent) and the Roman Catholics (62 per cent) who for historic reasons in Britain are not custodians of much structural heritage.

Of the 197 respondents with a responsibility well over half (58 per cent) saw it as a 'useful' resource, though this percentage was reduced among women (33 per cent) and those in late career (55 per cent). Just under a quarter (23 per cent) saw it as 'partly useful', but again this was lower with those in late career (17 per cent). Thus, about a fifth (37 practitioners) saw their historical building as 'not useful', and this rose to over a quarter (26 per cent) among those in the late career stage. Perhaps it is

those approaching retirement who fully realise that buildings require energy and a long-term commitment, both of which are less available to them. The late career group's view is important for two reasons: it is based on the experience of years of ministry, and in that they represent a large and increasing group of clergy and ministers. The tendency that women are less positive about the historical building cannot be fully explained and is worthy of further study. Two other factors that decrease the positivity are having several buildings to look after, a phenomenon that is likely to grow as the number of full-time religious practitioners reduces, and the increasing reliance on small congregations for the expensive upkeep - a particular concern expressed by a few.

The vast majority of comments about historic buildings came from the Anglicans, as might be expected. However, respondents from all denominations saw the potential for education and outreach through visits by schools and open days and the like. Some Roman Catholics emphasised the use of the building in direct teaching: 'a Roman cruciform basilica is a wonderful teaching aid,' and the building is 'an excellent source of teaching material and visual aid'. This is not just in the plan and layout of the structure but in the detail such as 'stained glass, pictures and statues,' and the use of such forms for theological education is well attested.¹⁴ The direct link with the Christian community in previous generations was often described: one respondent wrote of the 'prayerful support of past generations who have used the building.' Recognising that as a group they have fewer historic buildings, it is still interesting to note that only one Roman Catholic described it as a drain on time and resources.

With their responsibility for the majority of historic church buildings Anglicans gave a mixed response. About half (60) were positive about their buildings, using such descriptions as 'treasure,' 'the spiritual heart of the parish' and 'much loved.' One wrote that the historical building 'shapes who we are in the community and draws people in,' another gave it a personification, 'it speaks to the community,' and another enthused, 'I have six medieval churches in my care [...] they are outstanding pointers to faith.' The historic beauty of the buildings is seen as part of the attraction and there were many opportunities for ministry through tourism, exhibitions, and for enhancing the identity of the local community; in particular, its use by local schools on a regular basis was prevalent. However, those without a medieval gem felt under-resourced and ignored: one with a 1930s building on a large housing estate wrote 'we are one of the ugly churches in the diocese.'

The other half of Anglicans saw the dangers inherent in the historic building, some making statements such as 'it is important we bring it alive to witness a living faith,' and 'it has to be a living and used building to help the village to have ownership.' There were many comments about the problems associated with an historic building, such as 'it is useful in that it has beautiful aspects that engender worship of God but it limits mission,' and the dead hand of history was apparent in others, such as 'our buildings have changed over the centuries but are now frozen in time.' There is a sense of exasperation in some comments such as: 'I have seven listed buildings, which are a financial millstone and unfit for the twenty-first century. I did not train to be a museum curator. They are cold and damp and have

¹⁴ For instance see B. Doerrer-Peacock, 'Transforming Imagination through Story and Stained Glass', *Journal of Adult Theological Education*, 6 (2009), pp. 141-152.

no facilities!’ and ‘history tends to drain resources, i.e. having to open churches for those who want to look at various features.’ The word ‘millstone’ was used several times, and in one comment there was a particular focus for criticism: ‘The Victorian Society is a frustration. They have no sense of the Spirit of Victorianism and obstruct innovation regardless.’

Among the 96 Methodist, Baptist and United Reformed Church practitioners with responsibility for historic buildings there were very few specific positive comments about this resource. The exceptions were those who worked in buildings associated with key figures in the past such as the Wesleys and William Carey. Otherwise the remarks were almost entirely negative, such as ‘I had responsibility for a number of listed rural chapels and without exception they were far more trouble than they were worth,’ and ‘I have a very ordinary Victorian Grade II listed building [which] is a total pain, absorbing resources and constraining mission.’ The phrases ‘obstacle’, ‘millstone’ and ‘drain on resources’ were commonly used by about 20 of this group, perhaps reflective of the fact that often their buildings are neither architecturally nor historically very significant and as such grant aid and support is harder to attract. This study has shown that there is scope for providing more resources for religious practitioners who work in church buildings of the last two hundred years and those in the Non-Conformist traditions, so as to affirm these as important parts of the Christian heritage. One United Reformed Church practitioner wrote of how ‘maintenance is a struggle as resources of capital and people are limited’. Although not explicitly mentioned Methodists will face the greatest potential for such a burden because through the circuit system on average they are responsible for more buildings than other religious practitioners.

It is interesting to compare the comments from members of these denominations with those of the 22 Roman Catholics with responsibility for an historic building; they considered their structural heritage as a physical connection to the tradition thus an enhancement of ministry. In contrast the other denominations value the written heritage, considering buildings to be more of a burden - perhaps because, on the whole, they do not play a direct role in augmenting this tradition.

The place of history in ministry

This study has highlighted the importance of history in the ministry of the present Church, a role that should be seen as essential. Christianity cannot escape the importance of history, as it is a religion rooted in the history of Judaism and centred on an historical figure whose very presence in history is a redemptive act. From the time of Eusebius - who sought to tell the story of the Church as justification for its existence and a way to mission to the world - through the era of Augustine with his unfolding of God’s linear plan, and in the succeeding centuries of change and rivalries, the Church has used history as a way to discover faith, justify it and declare it to others. Martin Luther wrote ‘historians are the most useful people and can never be honoured, praised and thanked enough.’¹⁵ Within the last century Paul

¹⁵ This is a translation from Luther’s preface to Gateatius Cappela’s *History of the German Peoples*, as quoted in J. M. Kittleson, ‘Historical and Systemic Theology in the Mirror of Church History: the Lessons of “Ordination” in Sixteenth-Century Saxony’, *Church History* 71 (2002), p. 743.

Tillich described the 'kairos' of history when revelation is especially pertinent, and Teilhard de Chardin outlined a progressive history of salvation. More recent examples include the work of theologians such as Hans Kung, who outlined a series of paradigms in the historical development of the Church, David Bosch and his six epochs in Church history, and John Milbank with his study of historical ecclesiology. Another important contemporary writer is Robert Doran, who in a series of works shows how systematic theology relates to both history in general and to its own particular historical development.¹⁶ Several others continue to contribute to the debate about the complex interrelationship between Church history and theology.¹⁷

At times of change when the Church faces fundamental challenges, history becomes a key theological tool to enable the Church to reconsider its identity, core values and tasks. In their own contexts of change, Eusebius, Augustine and Luther used history to bring new understanding and direction to Christianity; as such, the contemporary Church cannot ignore the resource of Church history. It is by relating to the Church of the past, the Body of Christ expressing faith and action in a very different world, that the Church of the present can find the confidence to be itself, and to reach beyond itself. In that encounter it is the very strangeness of the past that challenges the Church to be faithful, since the Body of Christ throughout history has in a variety of ways been faithful to the unchanging God. This is the theology of history, which both recognises that the very experience of the passing context of time and the building up of a tradition - preserved or re-created or reformed - does substantially affect the Church, its nature and its ministry; indeed, it calls the present Church to engage with that of the past, however difficult this might be, because the Body of Christ is not limited or denigrated by the passage of time. Furthermore, history shows how the Church is capable of living faithfully in every human context: giving tangible hope for the present and the future.

It is significant that this study reveals a general interest in history among the vast majority of the 302 religious practitioners. Even though this may be discounted as recreational or superficial, the high general interest presents a strong base on which to build further engagement and draw religious practitioners and their congregations into the transforming relationship with Church history. There are greater possibilities with the sizeable groups that show a more in-depth involvement, the 46 per cent who read academic history books and the 27 per cent involved in historical research.

Those practitioners who have engaged at an academic level will know that history as a discipline itself has undergone reformations, which directly affect religious history, and Church history in particular. This might be considered in a series of phases.¹⁸ The first phase is the non-reflective partisanship of traditional historians, who seek to mould history to fit Christianity so that ideology is established and even proved through considered facts. This was a legitimate use of history in the past but still persists, and history in this case is simply the servant of

¹⁶ See R. M. Doran, *The Trinity in History, A Theology of the Divine Missions*, 3rd Revised edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

¹⁷ A useful contribution is R. Williams, *Why Study the Past?* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005).

¹⁸ For an account of the development of history as a subject see G.G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Post Modern Challenge* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1997).

the Church, or rather just one part of the Church with a particular doctrine or practice to protect. There is plenty of evidence in this survey of practitioners who have adopted this approach, which may have been reinforced in some of their training and is probably pursued quite unconsciously. For instance, the assumption is made that the Victorian Church was strong and that we only need to copy their pattern of church planting to perpetuate their success, or that the eighteenth century Revival was universally beneficial and can be easily translated into the present time. Some historians may question whether this kind of activity really is to engage in history at all since the object is not to discover what actually happened nor relate to communities of the past so as to be affected by them, but simply and quite crudely to find precedential evidence to bolster a point of view.

Another phase of the discipline of history that has affected Church history was to adopt the scientific reasoning of the Enlightenment and believe that the truth is readily available if only you search hard enough. This 'modern' way of engaging in history is now largely discounted in academic departments though it is often still expressed through the social sciences. Again there is evidence for this kind of history in the attitude of the religious practitioners in the survey. For example, it was suggested that we can fully know what it was like to be an early Methodist preacher and as a consequence their experience will help us today; additionally, the presentation of the plain facts of liturgical change in the past could convince a present congregation of the necessity of accepting change. The search for truth is a natural aspiration for Christians though it would be a mistake to believe that this truth is so easily and comprehensively discovered. Historians have learned that our own context and agendas will always affect our view and use of past events. This is not to claim that the study of history is a futile task, but rather that the awareness of the influences on us will empower us to understand the thoughts and actions of others, with the potential of being changed ourselves by this revelation. This is all the more so with Church history where the relationship with the unchanging God is experienced by the Body of Christ in some very different places and times.

A further phase of history, which predominates in the contemporary academic discipline, can be described as postmodern or deconstructive: a view that our partiality has made scientific enquiry at best suspect and perhaps leaves us with more questions than answers. This may present the greatest challenge to the use of history in ministry, since this study suggests that most of the religious practitioners surveyed were looking to history for certainty. It is a feature of an historical religion that faith is based on historical 'facts' which, according to some, should not be subjected to excessive scrutiny. The postmodern Christian historian will want to differentiate between such 'facts', arguing that some can and should be challenged while others of a more theological nature will remain necessarily a matter of faith. An example of the latter would be the incarnation, which cannot be simplistically viewed as just an historical fact.

The quest for certainty for the Christian has to be focussed on God. To engage in Church history is to be involved in an on-going process of enquiry both retrospectively and introspectively, which is reflected in the ever-changing revelation of the Body of Christ. The only certainty is God so Church history, in highlighting this when everything else is subject to flux, has the potential to change the Church and to keep it closer and more faithful to that consistency. Every time the Church encounters the Body of Christ of the past dealing with the living God -

through readings, liturgy, music, art, buildings and so forth - the Church has the opportunity to be transformed and reenergised.

One particular contribution of the postmodern historical approach is to highlight why the focus of history for many of the practitioners fell on particular times and themes leaving most of the two thousand years of the Church untouched. The preference for eras of growth and schism, such as the Early Church and the Reformation, may be a reflection of the current challenges facing the Church. Similarly, the renewed interest in early women preachers meets a need of the present Church as it addresses feminist issues. However, such preferences should be applied with caution, particularly if there is a mining of Church history just to extract material that apparently justifies one particular view, however pertinent this may be. Church history can save the Church from such a partisan approach by attempting to present the whole experience of the Body of Christ in the past. The lack of interest in some groups in any history is also revealing. Perhaps, the question could be asked whether the irrelevance of history to many of the Methodist respondents is an indication of a denomination that for whatever reason is losing its identity.¹⁹

What the survey highlights about the role of the historical building is another example of how our view of history is determined by our context. Whether the historic building is a blessing or a burden, it does absorb much of the attention and resources of two-thirds of the practitioners in this survey. The preference for the medieval church building, usually extensively re-ordered in the Victorian era, may reflect nostalgia for a time when the Church did dominate society and the churches were supposedly full.

The connections revealed in this study between history and areas of ministry also show how the approach to history is partial. There was a tendency to narrow the scope of religious history to a denomination or tradition, or even use it as a tool for dealing with particular contentious issues, such as liturgical change. Over and above this it is quite natural that worship should be one the areas where history has the greatest relevance, for it is in the liturgy of Word and Sacrament that the historical nature of Christianity becomes very apparent. Worship is itself an act of making history, whether in the Eucharist with its focus on an historical event brought to life in preparation for the end of time, or in the recounting of the Biblical record where events of the past uplift and empower. Some historians may prefer to describe this kind of history as myth, because it is history enthused with divine revelation. Ironically history as myth is more problematic to the scientific approach than to postmodernism.²⁰

The third phase of history may have revealed our own partial approach, and the need to reflect on how and why we study the past. Many Christian historians are willing to adopt the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' appropriate to the postmodern approach.²¹ However, this is not to argue that the Church has to accept the deconstructive position entirely, for the Church does have a very distinctive contribution to make in response. Christians do believe that God is in control of

¹⁹ The appointment of a Heritage Officer to work across the Methodist Connexion will go some way to address this issue.

²⁰ There is no space to discuss the role of myth within Church history, but postmodernism at least allows the possibility of myth in the sense that all interpretations have validity.

²¹ See the useful collection of essays from the Evangelical standpoint in R. A. Wells (ed), *History and the Christian Historian*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

history, even if that control at times is hidden, and that history has direction, purpose and meaning. The task of the religious practitioners engaging in history is to connect the narrative of redemption with the narrative of world history, including contemporary issues like secularisation and fundamentalism.²² As such the Christian historian will challenge some of the monoliths of the present age, such as materialism, economic determinism of the left and the right, and cultural relativism - which ironically in the postmodern era have for some, including some academic historians, become irrefutable truths.

This is where theology can play its part in the study of history and our approach to understanding the past. It is a task that falls naturally to the whole Church, but also to religious practitioners in particular as they resource and energise the faithful at the local level. At times in the survey it seemed that this was taking place, though generally not enough either because of inadequate training or a lack of resources. The structural heritage is sometimes a hindrance in the task not least because its very presence can dominate ministry, while at other times it is experienced as enabling. In the end, history is too important for the life of the Church to be relegated to a recreational pursuit, as just a source for sermon illustrations, or worst still a weapon used to justify change. History needs to be rescued from such narrow and didactic purposes to be the story of the encounter with God, ever unique and recurring.

The final word goes to one respondent: "The study of history is key to our understanding of faith and theology. It is the core to our self-identity and the mission-shaped Church."

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²² History can be effectively used in debates about the latter precisely because in Fundamentalism there is often an appeal to an idealised and nostalgic social paradigm, which has very little historical basis.

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