

# A Short History of BIAPT

by The Revd Dr David Lyall, President of BIAPT

Practical Theology is a discipline in transition. When I was a Divinity student in Edinburgh in the early nineteen sixties we were given a few lectures under this title but these were essentially of the 'hints and tips' variety, they were only for ordinands and they were certainly not part of an examinable discipline within the structures of the BD degree. There were hints on preaching and the conduct of worship and how to visit (without getting too involved). Today Practical Theology is an academic discipline in its own right and courses have flourished in Britain and elsewhere. We now have our own national organisation (BIAPT) and 1993 saw the inauguration of the International Academy of Practical Theology. What has brought about this change?

The nineteen sixties and seventies saw the burgeoning of various forms of counselling in Britain. The theological colleges and universities could not remain immune from this influence and began to offer courses in pastoral studies which engaged with these new secular therapies. Around 1973 there took place in Edinburgh the first gathering of the teachers of these courses, a gathering out of which grew BIAPT in 1994. There were other important developments as well. Various pastoral counselling organisations were coming into being such as Clinical Theology and the Westminster Pastoral Foundation. And there were those within the churches who realised that dialogue with social and community studies was as important as engagement with the psychological and therapeutic. Also, new technologies were creating a different kind of society posing new questions for the church and its ministry. Hospital chaplains had to exercise their ministry in contexts which were both more secular and which raised cutting-edge ethical issues on a daily basis. There were new influences in theology as well, marked by Bishop John Robinson's *Honest to God* (SCM 1963) which proposed a much more constructive relationship with the world. What was required was a new way of doing theology which took seriously both the theological traditions of the communities of faith and the realities of contemporary life.

While it is arguable that much of the content of the sub-disciplines which constitute Practical theology – preaching, worship, pastoral care, mission – has largely remained unchanged, what is radically new is its method. The older idea was that Practical Theology was essentially Applied Theology. There were timeless truths – propositional and creedal – embodied in scripture and tradition which, somehow could be applied to each new circumstance. This approach was found too simplistic and inadequate. A new approach was needed and so the 'action/reflection' model was born, a way of doing theology in which theory and practice were brought into a constructive dialectic with one another. A central concern of BIAPT has been how this process takes place and recent consultations have explored the nature of the task of theological reflection which is integral to it.

So, who are we, this diverse group of individuals who call ourselves practical theologians? Some of us are academics who believe that true theology can only be generated in the context of a pastoral ministry contextualised in the life of the world; others of us are essentially practitioners, exercising ministry in parishes or hospitals, in counselling or social service but who do so in the conviction that such ministry is at its deepest and most effective when funded by the riches of our theological traditions. Most of us would claim to be both theologians and practitioners at some level; and all of us are committed to working together through conferences and publications on this exciting interface between theology and practice. Our website points to the ways in which this happens – our annual conference held in a different centre each year and the journal *Practical Theology* amongst many other ways.

In the nineteen sixties, Practical Theology did not figure within university degree structures. The nineteen seventies saw the emergence of certificates and diplomas followed by courses at degree level. The nineteen nineties witnessed a major expansion of Practical Theology at Masters Level. Now a number of universities are offering collaboratively a professional doctorate in Practical Theology. All this speaks of the growth of a discipline in which BIAPT has been a major influence. These developments are worthwhile in themselves. Ultimately, of course, their main justification must be both practical and theological – the proclamation of the Gospel and the building up of individuals and communities in a life of faith.

David Lyall