

LEADING WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW WHERE YOU ARE GOING



BAPTIST UNION PRESIDENT GEOFF COLMER REFLECTS ON FACING AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE... WITH AN INVITATION TO GREATER TRUST

How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You are Going by Susan Beaumont, is the title of a book I bought back in 2019. It proved to be an inspiring read and one that would have a relevance way beyond its intention, as the pandemic struck in early 2020.

In the summer of that year, I was diagnosed with myeloma and, at the time of writing, I'm recovering having recently undergone a stem cell transplant. I'm doing very well and am realistically hopeful that I will be in remission for some time to come. But I find myself in something of a state of limbo. As President of the Baptist Union, with my theme of 'attentive to rhythms of grace,' I have lots of good intentions but, especially in these early months, post-recovery, what will I be able to do? And more widely, what will there be to do as we continue to emerge from the pandemic? In conversation with many experienced and able ministers,

I hear repeatedly that they simply can't say what church is going to be like in the foreseeable future. Will people return to church as we know it, or will our experience of online church have changed things for some time to come, if not permanently? Importantly, how will we *be* as we come to terms with what the pandemic has done to our world and the part of it we inhabit? My sense of being in limbo is one that I imagine we may all feel for some time to come.

None of this means we simply acquiesce and do nothing. But at the same time neither do we subscribe to the 'don't just stand there, do something' school of ministry and mission. There is much to reflect upon and many guides to accompany us. I found Simon Barrington, speaking on the subject of recovery from his experience of international relief and development for a Baptists Together webinar¹, very helpful. I'm taken with a comment by Roy

Searle that we are being called to be 'co-creators of the future with God rather than curators of the past for God'. But there will be no quick fixes and we may still find ourselves grappling with, 'How to lead when you don't know where you are going.'

In Mark 4: 35-41 we read of Jesus calming the storm. Central to this episode is the fear of the disciples which, in the circumstances, doesn't seem unreasonable. Fear is the extreme end of the anxiety spectrum, but wherever we find ourselves along this spectrum, trusting can be hard, and at times very hard. If the disciples' fear is reasonable, it seems Jesus is a little harsh on them, except that maybe they are rebuked, not for being afraid of the storm, but because their fear doesn't allow them to express simple trust and to say to Jesus, "Help!" Instead they issue a fear-induced accusation, "Don't you care that we're dying?" What is equally central to this episode is that

1 baptist.org.uk/recoverwell

Jesus is with them in the storm, and he calms the sea. Jesus does care for them. Jesus does look after them. And maybe what we are to hear is that you might be paralyzed by fear and even assume the worst about God, yet God's grace still comes, along with an invitation to greater trust. A message for our time.



It seems that this is a season when it is especially important to be 'attentive to rhythms of grace.' Grace never comes to us by our design. Our deep desire on its own is not sufficient. It is always a gift. And so often grace comes to us left field. But we can, as it were, trustingly put ourselves in the place. A poem by Ann Lewin begins,



'PRAYER IS LIKE WATCHING FOR THE KINGFISHER. ALL YOU CAN DO IS BE THERE WHERE HE IS LIKE TO APPEAR AND WAIT.'

We can cultivate an attitude of attentiveness, of noticing, of becoming ourselves 'present'. One way of doing this, of becoming more attuned, is through the practice of gratitude. 'All around us are traces of God's blessings. Gratitude reveals just how porous the line is between the material and the spiritual.'² One spiritual tradition calls this an Examen. There are some simple steps: I open myself to God's presence; I ask for light and the leading of God's Spirit; I look back over the past period of time

and reflect; and then I ask, what am I most grateful for? And what am I least grateful for? And finally, I ask for God's help.

To reflect gratefully on the day that is past, or some other period of time, is a recognition that God does not know how to be absent and is always with us, even in the storm, and can open our eyes to those moments of grace, both drawing us further into God and refining our discernment of God's presence and action in our daily lives.



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2 C Christopher Smith, John Pattison, *Slow Church*