

Discerning the mind of Christ together is a gift Baptists share. Though not always easy, let's continue to connect, listen and seek God's will together in these challenging times.
By Lynn Green

There are some things you just begin to take for granted. I realised this as a new church member was enthusiastically reflecting on their first experience of a Church Meeting. They had come from a different church tradition which doesn't discern the mind of Christ together in this way, and saw it as a fantastic opportunity to be involved in shaping the mission and ministry of the church.

As I share this, I can hear others saying they haven't had such good experiences of Baptists discerning together; times when church meetings seemed more about conflict than prayerful discernment. I guess this is sadly a reflection of our humanity and sin, and the Church Meeting is not immune from that. However, hearing just how wowed this new member was about participating made me realise afresh just how precious and powerful this Baptist distinctive is.

LISTENING TO GOD TOGETHER AS BAPTISTS

The local church is not the only place we gather to discern together as Baptists, and over the years I have had many opportunities to participate in listening to God together in other settings. I have served on appointments groups where

the outcome seemed far from clear at the outset and yet, as we listened and prayed together, a beautiful consensus emerged that surprised us with a creativity and courage we had hardly dared dream of.

**WE NEED COURAGE -
THE COURAGE TO GO
WITH GOD, TO STEP
OUT OF THE BOAT, TO
WALK ON THE WATER,
TO SHARE WHAT LITTLE
WE HAVE**

I had the privilege of being part of Council when we offered our Apology for the Transatlantic Slave Trade in 2007. We gathered at the beginning of Council bringing with us our many

questions, concerns and different perspectives. Humanly speaking it seemed like we were a million miles away from ever reaching any sort of consensus. But we had come together as Council with our eyes fixed on Jesus and ready to listen for his voice through each other. The time we spent together, the depth of sharing, the quality of listening, the genuine wrestling in prayer, turned out to be the most profound experience of Baptists discerning together I have ever experienced. There was a quiet yet incredible experience of the Spirit being at work among us, helping us to see more clearly as God sees.

THE BRILLIANT THING IS, THOUGH, THAT AS WE FOLLOW JESUS, HE IS ALWAYS WITH US. HE IS OUR ROCK, OUR COMFORT AND OUR INSPIRATION

LONGING FOR MORE

I count it a genuine honour that, as a local church minister then, I was able to be part of something of such Kingdom significance. And when you not only know the 'theory' but have experienced the reality in such profound ways, you simply long for more! I long for more because my heart's desire is to be so attuned to the Lord and so in step with the Holy Spirit that when we come together to discern who God is and what he is saying and doing we perceive these things and align ourselves with them. For me this is a key strength for us as Baptists and I believe we should not allow cynicism

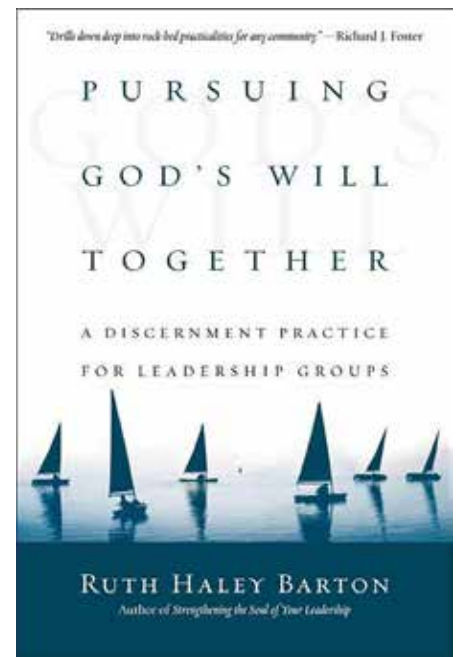
to creep in and deflect us from nurturing this beautiful aspect of our lives together. Yes, it takes excellent servant leadership to enable shared discernment but the investment is worth it. Because when we come together, encounter the Lord and discern his leading, then there is no stopping us! Responsive, flexible and fruitful discipleship and mission can be released through our corporate discernment and this is a wonderful thing. I'm excited to see what emerges from this year's Baptist Assembly, where there will be many creative connecting and conversation spaces for us to listen, learn from each other and seek God's will together.

As I look forward, I can see there are many opportunities and challenges that lie before us as a movement. In the midst of the tremendous seismic shifts we are experiencing, there is the huge potential that surrounds us to share Jesus in our contemporary culture and communities - the impact of technology, globalisation and climate change, and the offering of prophetic voices and action into the public sphere, to name but a few. It can feel a lot like we are needing to navigate uncharted territory and that our old maps can't serve us as well as they used to in the past. But it seems to me there is nothing more important at this time than to be discerning God's call to us together. In this way we will be Kingdom Cartographers, creating new maps as we explore and discover God in this unfamiliar territory.

WE NEED TO BE CHRIST-CENTRED AND OPEN TO SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION AS INDIVIDUALS

THREE CORE ASPECTS OF DISCERNING TOGETHER

A resource I have found particularly helpful in developing discernment practices is, *'Pursuing God's Will Together – A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups'* by Ruth Hayley-Barton.



As I have reflected on this book and think about our journey ahead, it seems important to me that we pay attention to the core aspects of discerning together.

Firstly, ironically, in order to discern well with each other, **we need to be Christ-centred and open to spiritual transformation as individuals.** The discernment of the group is greatly enhanced through the participation of discerning

group members. Attending to our own discipleship - through the spiritual disciplines of silence and solitude, engaging with Scripture, prayer and self-awareness - is key. Then our openness to the Lord will flow through into our shared life and be demonstrated through the fruit of the Holy Spirit and a genuine, open-handed desire for God's Kingdom to come above anything else.

In a world dominated by efficiency and hurry, **it is also good to remember that often discernment takes time.** Much of the time involved is invested in relationships and in careful listening to the Lord and to each other. But it also takes time to perceive what God is doing. In the same way that the disciples struggled to understand Jesus' approach and purposes at times, we too need to wait and be open to what God is really doing. I am conscious, too, that there are times when I need time and space to loosen my attachment to things being a certain way and be able to step into imagining new possibilities with God.

I think my final reflection about discerning together would be that **we need courage.** The courage to go with God, to step out of the boat, to walk on the water, to share what little we have. This is because I believe that a commitment to discerning together is a commitment to adventure! If we are genuinely seeking what God is doing and getting on board with that, we are heading out of our comfort zone. The brilliant thing is, though, that as we follow Jesus, he is always with us. He is our rock, our comfort and our inspiration.

Baptists discerning together – it's not always easy, but it's beautiful and it's worth it. It's what we do, it's part of the best of being Baptist.

RESPONSIVE, FLEXIBLE
AND FRUITFUL
DISCIPLESHIP AND
MISSION CAN BE
RELEASED THROUGH
OUR CORPORATE
DISCERNMENT

CONVERSATION

What conditions make for wise discernment?

In your context, how do you ensure that all voices are heard and listened to?

STARTERS



Lynn Green is the General Secretary of the Baptist Union



Baptist Union General Secretary Jonathan Edwards presents the statement of apology to representatives of the Jamaica Baptist Union – Spring 2008