

# DIVERSE PEOPLE COMMON GROUND

Unity in diversity is perhaps our most compelling characteristic as Baptists.

But how can we reach our potential amid conflict? Craig Gardiner offers this reflection

**E**arly on the first morning of Baptist Assembly, I took a walk along the beach. I was tired, but as the sun came up, I felt compelled to tread the shoreline. That week had been demanding, the journey to Bournemouth was long, and my sleep had been punctuated by the noise of passing revellers on the sands. (Probably not my fellow Baptists!) The tide had smoothed away all evidence of their presence and perhaps in my sub-conscious was that image from the Footprints prayer. Maybe I longed for a seashore icon to affirm that God was carrying me. We'll never know, because before I even removed my shoes, I met a

council employee clearing away the nocturnal detritus. As we chatted, my attention was drawn to the overlapping footprints, etched in sand, trampled around the bin. I snapped a photo of night-time trainers, boots and sandals, perhaps even a Manolo Blahnik. It felt like an icon for our diversity and unity, Baptists gathering round a 'bigger table', with varying church experiences, missional endeavours, and theological convictions: here was a diverse people imprinted on some important common ground.

I carried that image throughout Assembly. Notably, as contributors asked, '*What conversation would you like the Baptist Family to have together?*' there was a rich diversity of passions present. But no-one pitched for priority, much less sought an exclusive focus for their concern. Of course not. Our purpose was to reflect our diversity and celebrate it on our common ground.

This unity in diversity is perhaps our most compelling characteristic. It is arguably our greatest gift to ecumenical relations and perhaps the wider world. Baptists don't have to sing from the same hymn-sheet, approve identical theologians or agree a code of ethics to still be Baptist together. Instead, we covenant in relationships that encourage not uniformity, but diverse accountability to God and one another, as churches, colleges and associations. This distinctive way of 'being church', which is 'neither independent nor hierarchical' has repeatedly featured in our college's assignments on Baptist identity this year. Students have wrestled with the tensions of freedom and responsibility in covenantal life. Learning to '*watch over and walk with another*'<sup>2</sup> as our forebearers sought to do and as we seek to emulate in contemporary ministerial formation, means genuinely co-hosting diversity in community. It means celebrating what Letty Russell calls our

<sup>1</sup> Paul Fiddes, Brian Haymes, Richard Kidd and Michael Quicke, *Something to Declare: A Study of the Declaration of Principle*, 1996. This is now out of print but can be downloaded here: [www.baptist.org.uk/somethingtodeclare](http://www.baptist.org.uk/somethingtodeclare)

<sup>2</sup> The historical Baptist language of 'watching over each other' and 'walking together before God' in 'ways known and to be made known' was incorporated into the BUGB Covenant 21 Service written to mark the millennium and can be found here [www.baptist.org.uk/covenant21service](http://www.baptist.org.uk/covenant21service)

'emancipatory difference'<sup>3</sup>, seeing points of diversity not as reasons to define, denigrate or downgrade those who differ from us, but to realise the very thing in others that is not like us, may be an important epiphany for our time. Without embracing such differences, our understanding of Christ is undoubtedly diminished, and our table of communion becomes an anaemic revelation of its host. To live in covenant means persistently enquiring '*who is missing from this table?*' and that demands a discipleship that moves from defensive hostility to open-hearted hospitality. Few people consider themselves as being deliberately hostile, and yet when people passionately disagree about belief and practice, conflict is perhaps inevitable. While conflict need not precipitate hostility, or fence the table of our hospitality, history shows that Baptists do not always handle difference well.

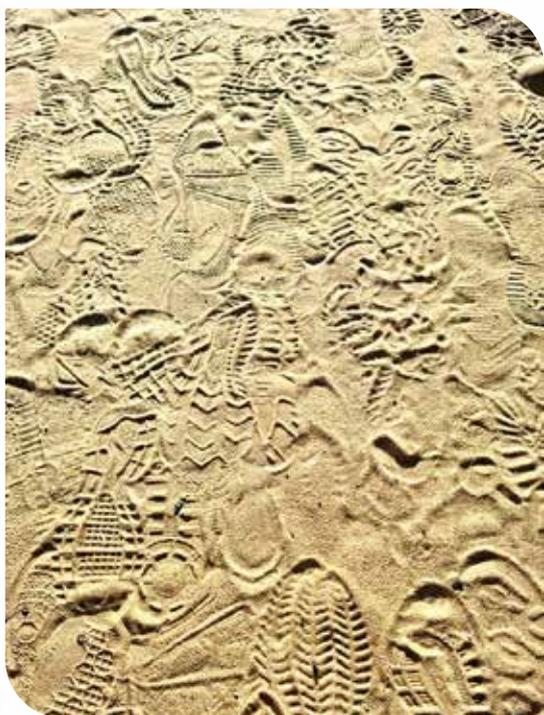


Photo by Craig Gardiner taken at Assembly 2022

Despite reconciliation being at the heart of the gospel, (2 Cor 5:17-19) transforming conflict as ambassadors of Christ's shalom (2 Cor 5:20) is a persistently weak element of our ecclesial culture. Consider, as but one example, the polarising enmity of the Downgrade Controversy<sup>4</sup> in 1887 and the shadow of fear it cast over the denominational consciousness in 1971 as we responded to Michael Taylor's Christological reflections. My observation is that such shadows are far from being dispelled, even among those who affirm that 'new light and truth' can 'break forth from God's word'.<sup>5</sup> Failure to transform hostility into hospitality risks diminishing our care, cheapening our witness and lessening the power of words we preach like reconciliation and redemption. Our fractured world longs for communities that transform conflict into reconciliation and if we have not always demonstrated how to do this, then let's now take heart that chances still present themselves for Baptists to be living parables of balm. But this demands a discipleship that forsakes hostility for hospitality.

It is Henri Nouwen who sees the move from '*hostis to hospes*', hostility to hospitality as the vocation of a maturing church. He suggests that hospitality can never be a '*subtle invitation to adopt the life-style of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find [their] own*'.<sup>6</sup> Christian hospitality can never be an invitation to 'become like us', but rather it offers a space for our

shared emancipatory difference to lead us into communal transformation. To do this well, Nouwen says, we need both '*receptivity and confrontation*'.<sup>7</sup> Receptivity simply means we invite those with whom we may have conflict, to enter our world on their terms not ours. Easier said than done perhaps, of course, for this requires us to be 'at home' in ourselves. If we are not hospitable to ourselves then our need for other's love, approval, and presence, will leave us uncomfortable in ourselves, unable to create or curate a welcome for difference.

But genuine receptivity must include confrontation. Without receptivity, confrontation can be devastatingly wounding, but without owning our differences, hospitality can lack discernment. We are not called to be 'neutral 'nobodies',<sup>8</sup> but people with convictions and boundaries. It's often 'in the fray'<sup>9</sup> of engaging our differences, that we discover the unfolding purposes of God. We have a history that is ours, and for good or bad it is our home. 'An empty house is not a hospitable house'<sup>10</sup> says Nouwen: without the memories of lives shared together, it can never be a home. We must be honest that our Baptist life together is indeed our home, where we walk with and watch over what we believe, how we behave and belong. Only with the empathy of receptivity and the conviction of confrontation are we truly hospitable to the potential of our diversity.

Thankfully we already have a home for such hospitality, one deliberately designed to balance receptivity and confrontation.

<sup>3</sup> Letty M Russell, *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p31

<sup>4</sup> [bit.ly/spurgeondowngrade](https://bit.ly/spurgeondowngrade)

<sup>5</sup> These words from the congregationalist pastor John Robinson in 1620 are perhaps best remembered in the Hymn, 'We limit not the truth of God' by George Rawson, see *Baptist Praise and Worship*, (Oxford: OUP, 1991) 107.

<sup>6</sup> Henri JM Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, (London: Fount Harper Collins, 1998), p49.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p70 ff.

Our *Declaration of Principle*, along with our theologies of covenant, commits us to the authority of Christ as revealed in Scripture, but offers each church the freedom to interpret and administer this under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Declaration was a deliberate and hospitable response to the Downgrade Controversy that lured Baptists into increasing hostility. Contending factions risked abandoning Jesus's call to be ambassadors of reconciliation.

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As the authors of *Something to Declare* remind us, the Declaration was '*designed to hold together in covenant a wide Baptist family, rather than to create the kind of boundaries, more typically associated with a Confession, which largely serve to hold people apart.*'<sup>11</sup> We still walk with each other in this way, not for our own sake as the Church but, as the Declaration reminds us, for the purposes of God's mission.

For this mission to be authentic it must be rooted in the heart and mind of Christ as encapsulated

in the Christological hymn of Philippians 2:5-8. Paul's description of Jesus' humble incarnation together with his depiction of the 'rights of an apostle' in I Corinthians 9, leads Morna Hooker to conclude that Christlike empathy is '*the pattern for all mission... - getting alongside those in need - in order to share with them the blessings of the gospel.*'<sup>12</sup> Such empathy challenges us, pastorally and missionally to be present with others in ways that risk daring to temporarily lay aside the values we hold for ourselves to enter another's context without prejudice. If we are to transform hostility to hospitality, then empathy will be the heartbeat of our walking with one another. Empathy is, as Carl Rogers taught us from decades of person-centred therapy, '*a healing agent, because it releases, it confirms, it brings even the most frightened client into the human race. If a person is understood, he or she belongs.*'<sup>13</sup> This desire for belonging is the shared identity of humanity, it is the common ground for all pastoral and missional hospitality, for as Nouwen reminds us '*in a world full of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture and country, from their neighbours, friends and family, from their deepest self and their God, we witness a painful search for a hospitable place where life can be lived without fear and where community can be found.*'<sup>14</sup> Empathetic Baptists might yet become such a hospitable community.

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Empathy, hostility and hospitality were on my mind as I walked along a different beach today. I was far from Bournemouth and the busyness of Assembly, but close enough to remember Alan Donaldson's sermon. He preached that '*something was dying and something is not yet born*' and I think he's right. On the sand today, I feel close enough to pray, 'could it be our hostility that is finally dying, and hospitality that is being born? Could Baptists dare inhabit such new and hallowed common ground?'



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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p71.

<sup>9</sup> See Helen J Dare, *Always on the Way and in the Fray: Reading the Bible as Baptists* (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Nouwen, p71.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Fiddes, Brian Haymes, Richard Kidd and Michael Quicke, *Something to Declare: A Study of the Declaration of Principle*, pp9-10.

<sup>12</sup> Morna D Hooker and Frances M. Young, *Holiness and Mission: Learning from the Early Church about Mission in the City*, (London: SCM 2010), p91.

<sup>13</sup> CR Rogers, 'Rogers, Kohut, and Erickson: A personal perspective on some similarities and differences.' *Person-Centered Review*, 1(2), 1986, pp129.

<sup>14</sup> Nouwen, p43.