

BUILDING A BIGGER TABLE

BY INCOMING PRESIDENT HAYLEY YOUNG

It is a real honour to be serving as Baptists Together President from May 2022 to May 2023 and to have this opportunity to explain the theme of *Building a Bigger Table*.

What strikes me most when I read the Gospels is Jesus' table ministry; the way he so often used the act of sharing a meal; the act of breaking bread, as a way of letting people know they are seen and heard, known and respected.

We are living in challenging times. I believe that we as a Baptist movement, are able to speak truth, grace and Jesus' transforming power into our communities and movement;

but in order to do that, first we must listen to God and to each other.

There are several areas I would like to encourage us to explore in the coming year, and I believe Jesus' table ministry approach can aid us in our understanding and in developing these areas:

DIVIDED COMMUNITIES

Our communities (both in and out of the church) can be divided: divided by race, gender, disability, sexuality, understanding of God and economic circumstances. These divisions are not just words but a dark reality for many people who are excluded, discriminated against and more.

The table to which Jesus welcomed people was a diverse table: he gathered with priests and prostitutes, with the religious elite and the common street rabble, with his disciples and his adversaries. They are all treated with equal dignity: even if he sometimes had some harsh words for them, as they left Jesus' presence he continued to love them.

As a Baptist movement we have the opportunity to bring Jesus to our communities by expanding that table: by providing the kind of hospitality that embraces everyone equally, not pulling some close and keeping some at a distance.

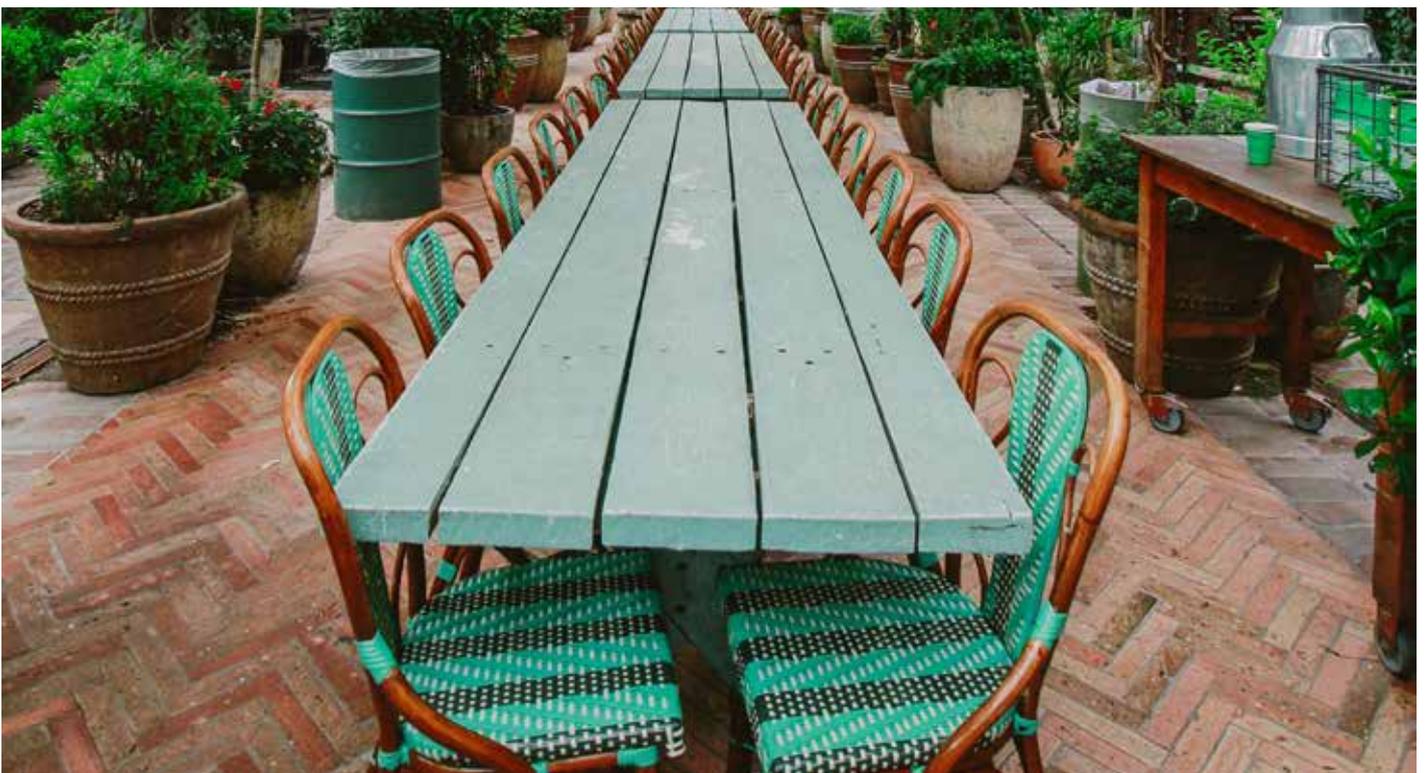


Photo by Belle Co from Pexels

This is a challenge for us in our leadership and in our gathered communities (whether that be in churches, missional communities or online). What does it look like for us to listen to each other, to hear each other's stories, to know the Holy Spirit working in each other and respect each other as disciples of Christ?

As a movement we are so varied and different, serving in many different contexts. My prayer this year is that, even in our differences and disagreements, we still cheer each other on. To allow our difference to reflect the very nature of God in community and not to let it divide us or get in the way of God's mission. That as a movement we would prefer each other's needs; that we bless each other; live to cheer others on. I believe when we do this we move away from divided communities and see the power of the Kingdom of God advancing.

IF WE ARE ABLE TO HUMBLE OURSELVES AND SEE THE 'OTHER', WE WILL EXPERIENCE GOD'S GRACE

MILLENNIALS IN LEADERSHIP

As churches and missional communities we have a challenge ahead of us about how we relate to the culture around us and the digital world. In the coming years, millennials will make up the vast majority of the global workforce. In fact, by 2030, millennials will represent 75 per cent of the global workforce. Will they represent 75 per cent of our churches?

If we are going to be serious about sharing the Gospel with millennials and younger people we need to do the work of listening - not in a passive way, but actively listening to the challenges and desires of different generations. We need to earn the right to speak truth into people's lives. We need to move away from 'shouting on the sidelines' to being incarnational in our very being in order to bring hope, love, grace and Jesus to everyone.

Everything is changing at a fast rate. In the midst of this change, we have a generation that is already redefining the world in which they want to live. So we need to engage, encourage and motivate the millennials and those younger who are already in our Baptist movement; releasing the prophetic voice of other generations to speak into our movement, our declining church and changing society.

DIGITAL COMMUNITY

There are two generations that have no or little experience of church or the Kingdom of God; so what we introduce them to now is really important. This means we have the opportunity to create something new, yet still founded on biblical truths.

Hannah Fleming-Hill, a Digital Missioner writes: 'We are in the biggest change in communication in the 500 years since the printing press revolutionised how we consumed and understood, not just religious texts but all written word, leading to a huge shift. It changed culture, altered habits, improved education and put the opportunity to consume the word of God in the hands of the people during the week, not

just from the pulpit in Latin on a Sunday. We have gone from paper to platform, from script to screen, from scribe to selfies.'

In the coming year, what might it look like to move beyond broadcasting services (as good as they are) to create the space - both the world we live in, and the digital world we inhabit - to be authentic, hopeful, compassionate, challenging and a Jesus-focused community?

MY PRAYER THIS YEAR IS THAT EVEN IN OUR DIFFERENCES AND DISAGREEMENTS WE STILL CHEER EACH OTHER ON.

WHO'S NOT AT THE PARTY?

In order to build this bigger table where people are heard, seen, known and respected, we need to be prepared to ask ourselves the question of who is missing? Who are we not hearing? Who is not being able to gather in the wonderful presence of Jesus?

This will be costly, it may be painful and cause us to engage with those we have looked at from a distance, but never really seen. We all need to do the work of addressing why people have not been welcomed in the past. But I believe, if we are able to humble ourselves and see the 'other', we will experience God's grace; we will learn to cheer each other on regardless of if we agree on everything.

Recently I have finished reading Michelle Obama's memoir '*Becoming*'¹

1 Published by Penguin (2021)

She ends the book with these powerful words:

'Let's invite one another in. Maybe then we can begin to fear less, to make fewer wrong assumptions, to let go of the biases and stereotypes that unnecessarily divide us. Maybe we can better embrace the ways we are the same. It's not about being perfect... There's power in allowing yourself to be known and heard, in owning your unique story, in using your authentic voice. And there's grace in being willing to know and hear others. This, for me, is how we become.'

Whatever our expression of church or missional communities is, we have the privilege of sharing Jesus' transforming power with those around us. My prayer is that having been 'attentive to the rhythms of grace'², we can continue to 'become' a movement that is building a bigger table.

To listen to other stories and hear what is happening during this year, you can follow my vlogs or any of my social media feeds: <https://linktr.ee/RevHayley> or scan the QR code.

CONVERSATION

Who is not at our table?

How can we actively listen to the challenges and desires of different generations?

STARTERS



Hayley Young is President of the Baptist Union of Great Britain 2022-23. She will be inducted into the role at the 2022 Baptist Assembly. Hayley is the Transitional Strategic Leader (Regional Minister) of the Northern Baptist Association



² As President, Hayley succeeds Geoff Colmer, whose theme was 'Attentive to the rhythms of grace'