



THE HOPE OF the treasure WITHIN

BY LYNN GREEN

Sometimes I feel like I inhabit two worlds as a leader. In the world where I connect with local churches, regional and college colleagues, I am constantly encouraged by stories of hope. Stories of Christ-centred love, prayer, serving and mission. Stories of creativity, adaptability, passion, dedication and imagination. This edition of our magazine is testament to that: packed full of story after story of the amazing and inspiring things that God is doing in and through our movement. Our Baptist family at its beautiful and contextual best!

Yet I also inhabit another world at the same time. As a church leader in the UK in the 21st century I also have to face into the loss of Christendom and all that entails. It's pretty bleak. All the metrics

we have tracked so faithfully over the years as a Baptist family are headed in the wrong direction. And this is not just a blip, this is a consistent, slow and steady decline over many years. Overall, we are closing churches faster than we are planting them. The number of members in our churches is also decreasing steadily. The financial resources we share among the family to enable mission and ministry are declining too while demand for resources is increasing year-on-year in so many different ways. And even though we have the DNA of a flexible, responsive, grassroots movement at heart, it's also a reality that our complex structure makes it difficult for us to tackle these issues of decline. Most can agree that significant change is needed, but finding a consensus about a way forward is altogether different.

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But of course, it's not just us experiencing this. Even as we rejoice with those denominations and streams that are seeing growth, we do so realising this is against a backdrop of growing secularisation across the UK. The most recent census figures remind us that our experience of decline needs to be seen and understood in the context of much bigger cultural shifts. The census data reveals 'For the first time in a census of England and Wales, less than half of the population

(46.2 per cent, 27.5 million people) described themselves as 'Christian', a 13.1 percentage point decrease from 59.3 per cent (33.3 million) in 2011.¹ In a recent article, Baptist minister-in-training Amanda Higgin comments, 'For young people, however, this outcome was less than surprising. Christians born since 1980... have been raised in an increasingly post-Christian society.' (See page 44 and baptist.org.uk/higgin)

Two worlds. Both are true. What are we to make of that?

The passage I have been dwelling in recently is 2 Corinthians 4:7-18. It offers a picture which, I think, helps us to understand our present circumstance. Treasure held in jars of clay. How relevant and timely that feels.

DEATH, STRUGGLE AND
SUFFERING ARE PRESENT,
BUT THE LIFE OF JESUS IS
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Clay jars are ordinary, unremarkable, and functional. They are perhaps rough and chunky and unlikely to be beautifully decorated. They are affordable, breakable and disposable. As one commentator writes, there is no chance of anyone confusing the treasure with the container!

In the world where we experience decline and the impact of our post-Christian context, we feel the 'clayness' of it all. We are indeed hard pressed on every side, confused, disorientated and marginalised. We experience the 'clayness' of our discipleship, our churches, and the complex structures of our movement.

This can lead us to become preoccupied with our struggles and the reality of decline. In turn, this leads to a fixation with what we don't have and being driven by fear of scarcity and there not being enough. We long to get rid of the 'clayness' of our current situation and recapture a former golden era where we were adored and enjoyed pride of place.

But, of course, the point of the passage is that it's not all about the jars! The jar is simply a vessel to hold something. In themselves, they don't need to be great. They get broken, they can feel clunky and unsophisticated. But do you know what? They're not the main thing!

'But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.'

This idea is further developed through the imagery of death and life being inextricably bound together. Death, struggle and suffering are present, but the life of Jesus is present too. Death and decline are at work, but life is also at work in and through us. We haven't fallen out of God's purposes, neither are our struggles the last word. Our human weakness and 'clayness' are not going to thwart God's eternal purposes! The good news of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is the treasure we hold.

So, it is really important to focus on the **treasure** and not on the jars of clay. This gives us hope.

While remaining aware of the reality of decline, I believe we really need to radically change our thinking and firmly focus on the treasure we hold. As individuals, churches and movement we need to keep our focus on this question:

'What is God doing and how can we get behind that with our prayer, action, people, resources and structures?'

The stories you will read in this magazine point to the treasure that we have and share. They are a snapshot of what God is doing and they are being shared because, while we are preoccupied with what we no longer have, there is a danger of missing the treasure among us.

TREASURE HELD IN JARS OF
CLAY - HOW RELEVANT AND
TIMELY THAT FEELS



When I was on retreat earlier this year, I was thinking about shifting the focus from the jar to the treasure and I created a mind map of all we actually have as a movement. By the time I had finished filling up a whole page I was so encouraged! We have...

- ⇒ An amazing DNA as a movement
- ⇒ A nationwide contextual network of local churches and missional expressions
- ⇒ A nationwide network of passionate and gifted leaders and volunteers
- ⇒ Loads of brilliant groups, networks and Round Tables collaborating around different themes
- ⇒ A nationwide network of gifted trans-local leaders
- ⇒ World-class ministerial formation and theological reflection

- ⇒ Significant financial resources
- ⇒ A wealth of specialist expertise and advice to support churches
- ⇒ Credibility in the public square and a reputation for quality community engagement

Such tremendous treasure!

Radically changing our thinking and firmly focusing on the treasure we hold means that we need to **deepen our faith and hold our nerve**. We are experiencing the end of an era and many things that have been precious to us are going to die. But we need to keep on trusting God is at work. We need to keep remembering that death and life are entwined together and trusting that while a lot is dying new things are also emerging. We need to honour all that has been while making it a priority to fan into flame all that God is doing and will do in the future. We need much prayer and divine imagination to create the conditions for what is yet to be.

'Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So, we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.'

Two worlds. Both are true. But we choose to focus on the hope of treasure within.

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'WHAT IS GOD DOING AND HOW CAN WE GET BEHIND THAT WITH OUR PRAYER, ACTION, PEOPLE, RESOURCES AND STRUCTURES?'



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