

Re-thinking the kind of community that God has called us to be



Let's not ignore the lessons that this unimagined moment in our history offers to teach us, says Phil Jump

I know it's a well-worn phrase, but we really are living in quite unprecedented times. So it was something of a minor triumph that after being forced to cancel the first physical gathering of the **Baptists Together Young Adults round table** due to Covid-19 lockdown, we managed an online get together using one of the now familiar video conferencing platforms.

The vision was clear – how do we become a church that attracts and includes a generation that seems to be disturbingly absent in many of our congregations? Not at the expense of others, but in order to be a truly inter-generational community.

Yet as I navigated my way through the screen shares, comment columns and mic mutes, I increasingly came to realise that we have suddenly been forced to connect in ways and using technologies that are taken for granted by this generation. As one twelfth of a Baptist round table met in one room of my house, my eleven year old daughter was in the next, doing a home-school maths test with the faces of her usual classmates smiling from their allocated boxes on the screen of her smart phone. As we took a coffee break, my wife reminded me that we needed to book a slot with the care home Skype team, to connect and say hello to my mum (who does still insist on putting the tablet next to her ear!!)

But having watched our two eldest children make their own way into young adulthood, I also came to realise how these new technologies represent a way of life that they have both shaped and been shaped by.

Engaging with this generation is not simply a matter of finding an appropriately trendy way of attracting them to our 'business as usual' church, or even simply injecting it with an appropriate dose of alternative content. It means re-thinking and re-understanding the kind of community that God has called us to be.

Why sit in a room together to listen to a sermon, when that can just as easily be done with our friends at the local coffee shop? Why listen to that sermon, when there's a better sermon on offer in the 'up next' list on the phone screen? And even as we take those first tentative steps into this virtual reality, we quickly realise that there's a whole load of people out there who will never listen because it's Sunday morning and that's what they've always done – but will re-watch it six times on replay, and Whatsapp it to all their friends, if it has something relevant to say to them, if they believe in the person preaching it, and if they want to discover more about the Jesus in whose name it's being preached.

And so this world turns back on me – am I preaching because it's Sunday and that's what's expected of me, or because I passionately believe in something that I want others to believe in too? Because God has given me something to say that I feel compelled to put 'out there' or because I've got a weekly twenty-minute slot to fill with my words, irrespective of whether I've got anything to say? Like I said, this is a generation that challenges us not to depart from our traditions and familiarities, but to re-discover their core purpose – as one participant put it, becoming a church that is less a programme of shared activities and more a network of disciples.

As churches and ministers rush to sign up to conferencing platforms and Youtube channels, we are being forced to confront and engage with a world that already exists – not simply through the fibre optics of the internet, but in the veins of the generation who have never lived without it.

What is happening across the world right now is devastating and tragic for many individuals and families, and we must never forget that. But as we seek to mourn with those who mourn, stand alongside those who fear, and play our part in our community's response – let's not ignore the lessons that this unimagined moment in our history offers to teach us.

The question we need to ask is not why this generation aren't turning up in our world, but why, until now, have we never bothered turning up in theirs?

Phil Jump is Regional Minister Team Leader of the **North Western Baptist Association**

The Baptists Together website has a section dedicated to our response to the Coronavirus. It is both extensive and regularly updated - please visit baptist.org.uk/corona

