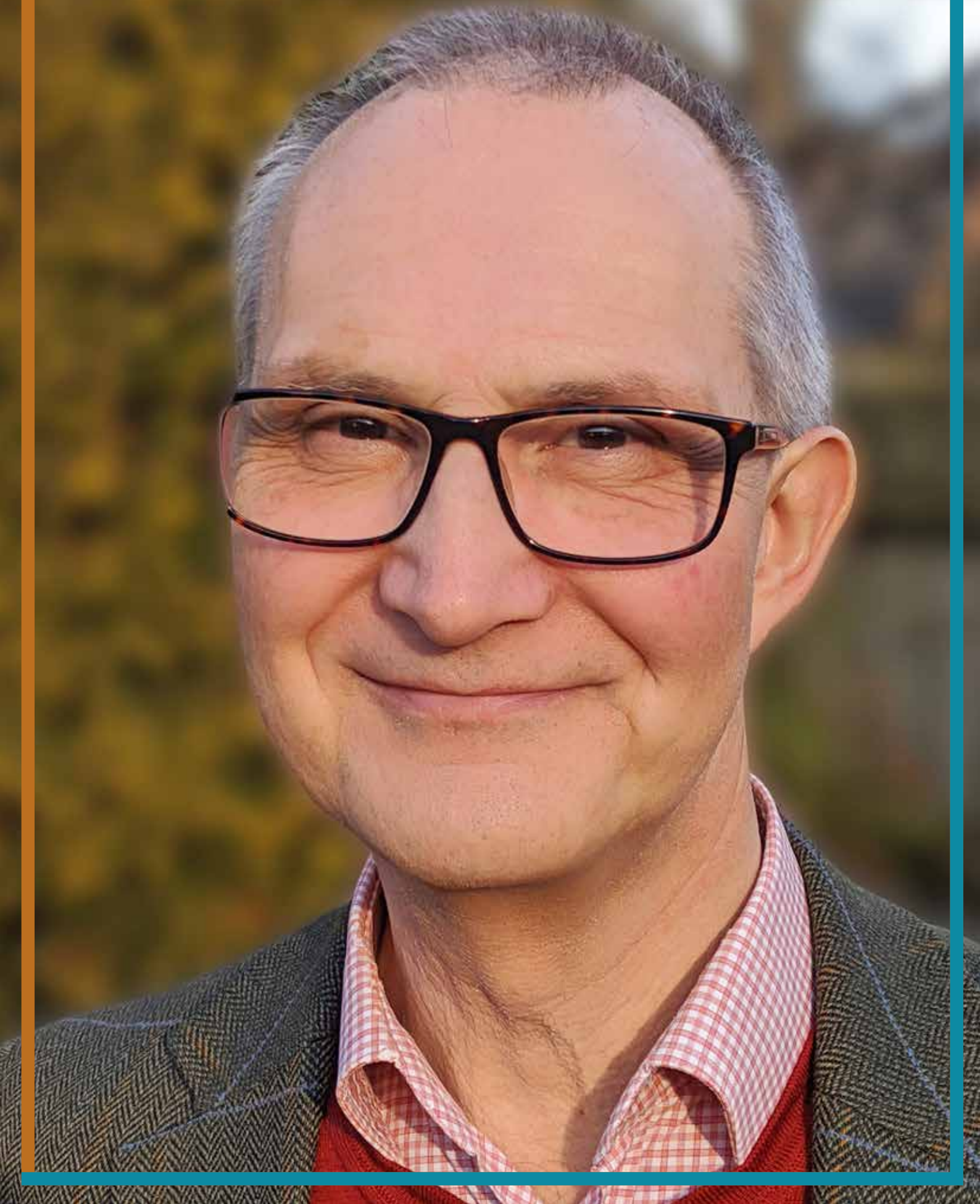


Photo: Colin Pye



Attentive to Rhythms of Grace

Incoming President Geoff Colmer introduces the presidential theme for 2021-2022

At the start of 2015, one of my hopes was to see a kingfisher. I'd never seen one before and I even considered contacting the Buckinghamshire Bird Society to ask where I might go to catch a sighting. On 2 January that year, my wife Cazz and I were walking in the parkland very near to where we live, when along the brook I saw a bird hurtling towards us. As it passed us, I turned and the light caught its fluorescent blue and orange colouring: it was a kingfisher! I was reminded of the poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'As kingfishers catch fire...' and this was exactly my experience.

This was a gift, a moment of grace. Even more than this, it has changed the way I walk in the parkland because now, I'm always watching for the kingfisher. I don't see it frequently and when I do, invariably it takes me by surprise and comes again as a gift, a moment of grace. But the kingfisher is never far away from my attention.

Giving our entire attention to what God is doing right now, being attentive to rhythms of grace, requires an orientation, a disposition, an attitude.

When settling upon a theme for the presidency of the Baptist Union, 'Attentive to rhythms of grace' resonated for me. It is captured by the experience of the kingfisher and how I now walk in the parkland. But more deeply, it expresses what I've longed for in life and ministry. Subsequently, it has taken on further significance in two ways, one global and the other personal.

The world has changed because of Coronavirus. At the time of writing (early February) we are in another lockdown, a situation unimaginable a year ago. And when, eventually, we emerge from Covid-19, life will be far from what we think of as 'normal'

for some time to come, even with mass vaccination.

And my world has changed. Last July, following acute back pain, I was diagnosed with spinal myeloma, a blood cancer. My condition is highly treatable, though ultimately incurable, and currently I live with the effects.

So, what does being 'attentive to rhythms of grace' mean for Baptists Together, and what does it mean for me, at this particular time? Eugene Peterson in *The Message* translates Matthew 6:34 as 'Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now.'

God's nature is to give his entire attention to us – it is how God expresses his love, seeking encounter with us. We see this throughout the biblical story and it becomes our personal story. God's desire is that we respond by giving our attention to God, by responding with love to this encounter. This response isn't just a one-off, but a way of being, whereby we live with our attention upon God.

While this sounds all very lovely, the reality is different. It is all too easy not to be attentive. We live in an age characterised by anxiety, distractions, noise, busyness and drivenness where many things clamour for our attention. Little of this has gone away with the limitations of Coronavirus, although we can add to it a deep weary-ness. And, let's not kid ourselves, what is true of our society at large can be equally true of church.

Giving our entire attention to what God is doing right now, being attentive to rhythms of grace, requires an orientation, a disposition, an attitude. But for this to happen, we also require habits or practices which, rather than becoming a to-do list, become who we are. These habits or practices are based on an expectation that God is to be found in the very ordinary as well as extraordinary parts of life.

One tradition speaks of ‘finding God in all things’ and this can be our experience. As the apostle Paul (quoting a contemporary poet) puts it, ‘[in him we live and move and have our being.](#)’ Acts 17:28.

Some of these practices are more obvious and already part of our living as Christians. Being part of a church is an obvious place where, in all the ups and downs of our life together, we can give our attention to what God is doing right now.

... an expectation that God is to be found in the very ordinary as well as extraordinary parts of life

Becoming still and keeping silence, taking some moments to stop - look - and listen, what is often called contemplation, is intentionally becoming attentive to rhythms of grace. As are different ways of meditating upon Scripture known as Lectio Divina, imaginative contemplation, or Examen, ways of reading and praying that I’ll come back to during the year.

The psalmist declares, ‘[The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it.](#)’ Ps 24:1. Creation is the arena in which we are invited to be attentive to the rhythms of grace, as my story of the kingfisher shows. But the gifts of creation, creativity, that God gives to humanity, and which express themselves in the arts for example, provide windows onto God. For me, music often draws me into a heightened awareness of God in the here and now.

Connection with people, relationship and friendship, something which has become so vital and yet restricted with Coronavirus, can be a powerful way that we experience rhythms of grace in the face of the other.

Celtic spirituality speaks of ‘thin places’, places where encounter with God can seem just that bit easier, and more accessible. I can think of a small, out-of-the-way church in bustling Assisi, Italy, which is just such a place for me. But strangely, some of life’s painful experiences, such as illness and grief, can be a means of God coming very close, something I’ve experienced especially over this last year.

Being ‘attentive to rhythms of grace’ is vital in our mission. I’m drawn to Rowan Williams’ remark that whenever he meets someone he asks, ‘What is God already doing in this person’s life? And how can I help?’ Our engagement with mission must always be one where we join in with what God is already doing and this requires giving our entire attention to God.

There are many dimensions to explore in a life of being ‘attentive to rhythms of grace’, but for now I conclude with gratitude. Gratefully on the day that is past can open our eyes to those moments of grace, both drawing us further into God and, at the same time, sharpening our discernment of God’s presence and action in our daily lives.

As I look with excitement to the year ahead, I invite you to join with me in this daily prayer:

*Gracious Lord,
by your Spirit,
turn my whole being to you
that I might live this day
‘attentive to rhythms of grace’
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

Geoff Colmer is Regional Minister Team Leader of the Central Baptist Association. He will be inducted in May as Baptist Union President 2021-2022.

