

BAPTISTS AND THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION

It was 2018 when we identified the 'digital revolution' as a priority area across Baptists Together, writes General Secretary Lynn Green. Initially a slow burn, it's clear now it was a prophetic step seeing increasing momentum throughout our movement

As we seek to engage with the digital revolution and release its positive potential for God's mission, it's worth pausing a moment to remember how this came to be a priority area in the first place.

When I was appointed General Secretary in 2013, I was clear God's call to me was to enable us to live into the vision for collaborative mission that we had discerned together through what was known as the 'Futures process'.

Working with the then Baptist Steering Group, we used Patrick Lencioni's book *The Advantage* to help us gain clarity about our purpose and our culture values. One of the key questions we asked ourselves was, 'What is important now?' In a movement where strategy is dispersed among our many peer teams it was helpful to move away from 'strategic vision' language and embrace the idea of common or shared priorities that enabled us to get to grips with what was important at that point. So, we crafted a (rather long) list of key issues we believed needed addressing between 2015 and 2020. And let's be clear, this wasn't some centralised strategic vision, as I said earlier: this was us identifying what was important to us all and then trusting each other in our different teams to address these in relevant ways in our own context. Collaboration and freedom, in true Baptist spirit!

Fast forward to 2018. The question, 'What is important now?' carries with it a clear sense of the dynamic nature of the strategic process, and this is especially the case in a Baptist context. Three years down the line, our context was changing, and we were learning and changing too. We were also making good progress with many of the priorities; it was time for a review. This involved both Council discernment together with opportunities for further reflection with the All Team Leaders group that had now emerged alongside the Baptist Steering Group. In these different ways we explored together what might be key priorities for us in the next season, particularly in the light of the prophetic words we have been given from God about him doing a new thing among us. Given that our purpose and values had already been agreed, Council affirmed the four key areas of

shared work across Baptists Together that deliver our vision: equipping the local church for mission; investing in Godly leaders; planting and pioneering; enabling Baptist voices and action in the public square, in March 2018.

As we continued prayerfully to ask the question, "What is important now?" the digital priority area began to emerge. There were two key moments that year. The first was in October 2018 when Phil Knox, Head of Mission to Young Adults with the Evangelical Alliance, came and shared with All Team Leaders. He talked about the digital revolution and explained how this held three distinct revolutions:

- 1 The information revolution – a vast wealth of information is now available to us in ways unimaginable to a former generation.

- 2 The relational revolution – the profound effect on relationships through social media in particular, which in some ways satisfies the craving for connection yet loses the quality and depth of face-to-face encounter.

- 3 The attention revolution – the reality of constant distraction and the inability to be fully present.

At our following gathering in November, Rob Ellis, then Principal of Regent's Park College, facilitated us to continue to explore Emerging Adult Culture and Baptist Identity.

So, there was a key theme emerging about the digital revolution and our engagement with young adults. This was further enhanced through our Council discussions, when the theological issues around what it means to be human also came to the fore.

So, the digital revolution, along with five other areas became our refreshed shared priorities from 2018. Here is what Council unanimously agreed:

- **Embrace adventure:** Being serious about discipleship, willing to take risks, pioneer and move out of the comfort zone of familiar ways of doing things (Matthew 28:18-20) Council particularly wanted to embody this value in the context of mission, evangelism and discipleship
- Working through the remaining recommendations of the **Ignite** report
- **Developing leadership** in all its forms, together with a focus on equipping the whole body of Christ
- **Children, Young People and Families**
- A similar but separate focus on **Emerging Adults** aged 18-35 – a group largely missing from our churches
- **Digital revolution** – not only our own digital capacity but reflecting on the implications of the digital revolution on mission, ministry and society

Initially, there was not much tangible progress with the Digital Revolution priority, but then Covid happened! At the stroke of a Government edict we were catapulted into the digital revolution we had previously only begun to glimpse. As we rapidly pivoted to online church, meetings and community, young adults suddenly became key players in helping us navigate what was to many, a new world. And we had to begin to reflect on the bigger questions of what worship, community and mission look like in this new paradigm.



Phil Knox at a Baptist Steering Group meeting in 2018

But, of course, running church services online is only the tip of a very big iceberg. Grappling with issues about developing digital mission and the massive theological issues of what it means to be human in a world of AI all lie before us. Like generations before, we will need to prayerfully discern where God is at work and how we can join him in the goodness of these developments. This will also lead us into bringing a prophetic voice that speaks loudly and clearly to challenge the huge and far-reaching implications of the digital revolution. We need to work out how we are going to advocate for and embody the value and dignity of human life and the nature of community and relationships that is the nature of our triune God.

Clearly this priority area is gaining momentum now. It's beginning to appear in our colleges (the MA in Digital Theology at Spurgeon's College is the first degree of its kind across the world); we have helped to fund the Change Makers Project (see page 19) and *transform. church* - an online Baptist

missional community - has been welcomed into membership of Baptists Together (see page 16). We will need to continue to be engaged in investing resource and theological reflection in this critical area right across our movement.



Lynn Green is the General Secretary of Baptists Together

PRAYERS

The computer scan

I scanned my computer today,
a routine check for problems,
and watched aghast as the list grew:

viruses,
bugs,
spyware,
spam –
so much that had crept in
unnoticed,
insidiously infiltrating my system,
corrupting,
infecting,
destroying.

Examine me, Lord, and know my heart.
Test me and search my thoughts.
Delve deep within
and cleanse me from all that
fragments my faith and undermines
my commitment,
preventing me from living as you
intend.

Reformat,
renew,
restore.

Amen.

By Nick Fawcett

