



Dwelling, Discerning & Exploring

We're in a new context, a change of era – and that means discerning where God is moving in our neighbourhoods, and then taking risks to join in, says Roy Searle

Roy Searle is familiar to many Baptists. A former President of our Union (2005-6), Roy has been a Baptist minister since the early 1980s. He has pastored large and small churches, led the Northumbrian Community, and taught at many leadership training institutions. From 2016 to 2025 he served as a Baptists Together Pioneer Ambassador, working to support and encourage those called to the margins. On starting this role he spoke of his passion for “the renewal and reimagining of the church in the changing world and how the gospel engages with contemporary life.” Together with friend and Canadian missiologist Alan Roxburgh, Roy recently co-authored a book exploring this

reimagining in greater depth. Called *Forming Communities of Hope in the Great Unraveling*, it addresses the challenges faced by churches today. It is informed by their combined 90 years’ leadership, and conversations the pair have had with dozens of current leaders (for whom Roy and Alan host online discussion tables).

The book argues post war certainties are certainties no more and society (and the church) have changed - the great unraveling. It has led to uncertainty and anxiety. However, there is hope: God is at work in the shaking and we need to reorient our attention to discern what the Spirit is doing.

In the context of this edition of Baptists Together magazine, how might this thinking help us reflect on mission?

Defining reality: ‘We are in a place we’ve never been before’

The post pandemic world is the book’s context. “We talk about a 75 year story in the first part of our book,” says Roy. “The story basically emerging at the Second World War where we – with our human agency – were seen to be the winners. We could control and determine things. If there’s a problem, we could find

**GOD is at work in
the shaking -
how do we join in?**

resolution to it. If there was a challenge, we could overcome it. We've got it.

"But the whole experience of exile during COVID and lockdown was the realisation that we haven't got it. Post-lockdown for Alan and me, in conversation with other leaders, helped us realise we're in a place that we've never been before. It feels very different. Culturally, societally, ecclesially - things have changed."

Not least for the church. Lockdown removed "the stabilisers of a Sunday gathering in a building", Roy continues. "We became innovative, went online, got to know our neighbours." Post lockdown, many were asking where is church? What does it mean now?

And through his conversations since 2020, Roy says many leaders across the Western Church are leaving ministry worn out, disillusioned, weary, exhausted. "There's a lot of anger and anxiety around the church these days, mirroring society. This is rooted, I'm sure, in uncertainty. When you're uncertain, you get anxious and angry. The default is 'take back control', when what we need to be doing is to humbly recognise our dependency upon God and to ask the deeper questions as to what is happening."

Dwelling, discerning and exploring

The book's premise is that God 'is in the shaking', and still on the move. The authors cite similar periods of unrest, both in the Bible (Jeremiah, Luke or Acts) and church history (the Benedictines, the Celts). For churches, there needs to be a move away from an emphasis on our human agency,

to see God as the primary agent.

Roy and Alan highlight three key practices to help adapt: *dwelling, discerning and exploring*.

In terms of dwelling, primarily we need to dwell in God, right where we are.

The first call upon our lives is to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength. We need to seek God. We need people to think deeply and theologically. How we love God and how we think of God should shape everything we're doing in our churches.

And we need to dwell where God has called us to be, in our communities, neighbourhoods where we live, work, and hang out.

As we dwell with God, we are called to discern what the Spirit is saying to us, and what is God doing within those communities. It requires a relinquishing of control, technique, management, running programmes, and calls for attention, listening and discerning.

Inevitably, if you're dwelling and discerning, it will lead to exploring. This was the case both for Jeremiah's contemporaries, and the early church. Roy cites Acts 16, when Paul receives a vision to come to Macedonia, after the Holy Spirit prevents them entering Bithynia (modern day Turkey), which ultimately leads to the first convert in Europe (Lydia). "They're travelling, but the Holy Spirit stops them. And then they meet some women by a riverside. It wasn't in the plan. It was discovering, joining in the adventure, not having things prescribed."

Guests, not hosts

Roy underlines how doing life in this way is 'starting with where God's at work - not with the church.'

This requires churches and their members to learn how to be 'guests within our changing cultures'. This is a post-Christendom model, explains Roy, which chimes with Jesus' command to go into the world.

"A Christendom model is, we're the host. We invite people to come and join us. That's great - but that's not the context where we find ourselves today.

"In a post-Christendom society, we must get out and do what Jesus said. It's the Great Commission. I believe we've been training people and equipping churches to invite people to come into us. What I think God is doing now - and he did it in lockdown - is turn the church out into the world."

Mission in the local church

The book recognises how important leaders are in developing the awareness of the need for change. Roy says he is encouraging leaders to be "permission givers, facilitators, enablers, endorsers, affirmers - just supporters."

He highlights his own church - **Portrack Baptist Church**, which is led by Rachel Holland.

"If you go there on a Sunday gathering, it doesn't look like a Sunday service as such. It's a gathering, and the whole church has been looking at a passage of scripture. We started looking at John in 2025, and by October had only reached chapter 6 as we responded to what God was

GOD is turning the church out into the world

saying to us as a church. We weren't getting through a series, but learning to dwell together with Scripture and be responsive to what the Spirit was doing in our lives and neighbourhood.

"Rachel, who models a different way of leading, is encouraging and permission giving in helping us to dwell, discern and explore. She is asking and facilitating people to share what they are sensing God is saying to them, alone, individually, and what God is saying to them, to us, as a church. It's a very different way of doing things but it is good and so transformative. It's so liberating to hear people share where they have sensed God at work in their lives, beyond the 'walls of the church'. It moves us out of the pastor, teacher, leader at the front, telling people, this is what God says, to releasing and empowering the people of God.

"This is where as Baptists, we really should be in our element. Our ecclesiology reminds us we are all ministers, dwelling and discerning what the Spirit of God is doing. Leadership, yes, but no place for autocratic, coercive, manipulating expressions, more a togetherness as we all come around the Word with an openness to the Spirit's leading."

When reflecting on joining in with what God is already doing. Roy mentions another church in the north, **Alnwick Baptist Church**, led by Chris and Caroline Friend.

Alnwick has several missional communities which function in small and diverse relational ways. These missional expressions operate services, usually held outside the church building within the neighbourhoods and communities where the members of the church live and work.

"Chris and Caroline, together with other leaders of the church encourage people to discern what God's doing in their lives, and they're affirming and supporting them in exploring and experimenting.

"In the changing post Christendom contexts we find ourselves are both challenges and opportunities. So I think for our churches, if we can encourage people to dwell in God, dwell in Scripture, help people see where they are and discern what God's doing, we can then join in the adventure of what God is doing. And out of that will emerge a different way of being church, doing what the Spirit calls us to do."

"There's a narrative of hope"

Roy readily admits his book is challenging but believes "it contains prophetic insight, apostolic imagination."

"What we're really pleased is with, even those who've disagreed, is that it's got people thinking and talking," he says. "It's a call to return to God. And in returning to God, there's a narrative of hope. We want people to engage with the story of hope."



Forming Communities of Hope in the Great Unraveling by Roy Searle and Alan Roxburgh (pictured) is available on the Baptists Together shop

If you would like to know more about *The Commons*, (an initiative following the book) and its opportunities to bring leaders together around online table conversations, see: thecommonscooperative.com

Roy and Alan, who with Baptist minister Simon Mattholie lead *The Commons*, are currently creating an accompanying workbook.

