

January 2009

I am delighted to have this opportunity to wish you, your family and fellowship a very happy New Year. We enter 2009 surrounded by gloomy news and gloomier predictions. Nobody anticipated the financial disasters which befell our world in 2008 and nobody is worth listening to if they are certain how this downturn will end. Nobody knows.

This gives us an incredibly demanding context within which to serve the Lord. Financially, it is going to be a tough year on all fronts. My mind goes first of all to those families which are going to face the loss of employment. I have no doubt that local churches are wonderful at giving care and support to such families within our fellowships. But how about our neighbours and the 90% who never come to church? How are we going to show them the love and compassion of Jesus at such a time? The fabric of our society and particularly family life is under enormous pressure already, without the additional burden and indignity of financial catastrophe.

There is little doubt that finances will be under pressure within each of our churches. And if that is the case then it won't take long for that to feed through into the life of the Baptist Union. Home Mission is an incredibly exciting aspect of our life together, supporting nearly 400 different people in local churches, chaplaincies, regional and national ministries. I am so grateful for the generous support that is given for Home Mission and I urge everyone to work hard to ensure that giving continues to grow. But I know it won't be easy.

Against this demanding backcloth, I want us to think about hard about our message of hope. Hope was a big word in 2008. HOPE 08 was a wonderful initiative and many of you were involved locally in imaginative schemes to show the love of Jesus in action. If you have not already done so I urge you to look at the stories of hope which you will find on the HOPE 08 website. They are a great encouragement, and not least because most of them are the sort of things that any of us could do. I applaud HOPE 08 and it was my privilege to visit 10 Downing Street last week to hear Gordon Brown acknowledge the significant achievements of this year. But there is a very obvious question that we can't duck.... What next? That is to say in what ways are we going to live differently as a result of this Year of Hope?

My hope is that we have learnt with renewed force that the Good News belongs to the whole of our communities, and not just to our little Christian ghettos. There is no doubt that we have often been guilty in the past of retreating into our comfortable little Christian huddles. We have designed our churches so that they have suited us. We have ensured that our worship suits our taste buds and that our fellowship activities have been the sorts of things that we would want to attend. And then, occasionally and awkwardly, we launch into a frenzy of activity as we set up a mission and organize raiding parties into enemy territory. That might be an

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Written by Administrator
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exaggeration - but agonizingly we need to admit that it isn't that much of an exaggeration!

HOPE 08 has brilliantly endorsed the importance of doing acts of kindness that eloquently communicate the love of Jesus. I long for our churches to look like Jesus through their genuine and continual commitment to their communities. Jesus reached out to every kind of person. He deliberately went out of his way to spend time with the marginalized and the misfits. There was nothing comfortable about Jesus' ministry. He boldly reached out to those in need no matter how many feathers were ruffled amongst the respectable members of society.

I can't help feeling enormously encouraged as I step into 2009. There are problems that will need to be faced, and lots of them, but I believe that there is a gritty determination in our churches to live in the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We know it won't be easy, but we didn't sign up on that basis. We know that as we work for Christ we will find the greatest joy and the greatest fulfilment imaginable.

St Paul often speaks of hope. One of my favourite verses is Romans chapter 15 verse 13. It's a prayer and in the context of his Roman hearers it's an amazing prayer. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may overflow with hope." Rome cannot have been an easy place to be a Christian. The Roman Empire was often violently opposed to Christians and was always a hostile environment in which to serve the Lord. This would hardly seem to be a promising place to experience hope! But Paul is clear that hope does not depend on outward circumstances but on the nature of God, and God is hope. And so he prays for them to experience hope in their Christian lives. But then he reaches much further. He prays that they will overflow with hope. That is to say, God is a God who not only gives us enough hope for us to survive in our own lives, but he gives us so much hope that it freely flows over into other lives.

Whatever happens in this New Year I pray that you will encounter our Great God of Hope, and as you follow him I pray that you will experience what it means to overflow with his hope. May your local church bubble over with hope in 2009 – and may your community see God's hope turned into thousands of acts of kindness.

Happy New Year!

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(This article first appeared in the Baptist Times edition of December 24th 2008 and is reproduced here with thanks to the editor)