



UNCERTAINTY AND OPPORTUNITY

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Pondering where we can find spiritual wisdom as we look to the future, Lynn Green draws insight and encouragement from the Early Church

Ongoing Uncertainty

Looking back at the unfolding events of March 2020 I remember just how much it felt like 'stress city' in those early weeks. Now we find ourselves in the midst of a different quality of stress and uncertainty. Then it was all about fear, having to stop most of our familiar patterns of life and not having any idea when restrictions would be over. Now it seems so much harder in ways we hadn't anticipated. Now, even the relative certainty of rules and restrictions has been removed. We have exchanged a frustration of 'being told what to do' with all the complexities of having to make decisions ourselves. It feels like we are untethered and floating in free space – free, yet also vulnerable. It seems like the idea of 'Freedom Day' was a tantalising prospect that turned out to be more like a mirage in

the desert! And I am so aware that this is especially challenging for church leaders, who would find this demanding at the best of times, let alone at the end of 18 long months of pandemic when energy and resilience are at a low ebb. Pondering where we can find spiritual wisdom as we look to the future, my thoughts turned to Acts 11:19-30 and I want to share some of my reflections from this passage with you.

Being scattered

Acts 8 tells us about a pivotal moment in the life of the Early Church.

'On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.'
Acts 8:1

The external realities of persecution scattered the church and, like the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, so much that was familiar went out of the window! Very soon, though, we read that those who were scattered preached the word wherever they went. God's Kingdom purposes were not thwarted but seeded into new Jewish communities instead. And it must have been tough. All that fear, upheaval and uncertainty. Yet alongside there was all the excitement of new opportunities and seeing God at work outside of comfort zones. I think that we can identify with some of the emotions those early disciples must have gone through.

Similar to the situation we find ourselves in now, what I see happening later in Acts 11 is a deeper journey into uncertainty

- one which had not been anticipated and which formed a further pivotal moment. As for us, the uncertainty and challenges of being scattered stretched the disciples into even deeper uncertainty and uncharted territory as new freedoms emerged. Not only was God stretching the church's geographical spread, he was also taking things to a new level by seeding the good news into other cultures too.

'Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.'
Acts 11:19-20

Oh my! Just when they thought that they had been through enough uncertainty and change here comes yet another massive shift to get their hearts and heads around! As we face yet another massive shift in what it means to be church, I believe that there are some key insights and encouragements for us from this passage as we journey deeper in this new season.

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Both / And

What I see in these chapters in Acts is a great example of the strength of being a 'Both / And' people. Did you see in that first quote from Acts 8, above, they were scattered, but the Apostles remained? Did you see in the quotes from Acts 11, some took the message to Jews and others to Greeks also? The fact is that some stayed and many went. The fact is that some preached to Jews and others reached beyond to connect with new cultural groups. As I will draw out later, the Apostles and the scattered ones who went to other Jews and the scattered ones who went to Greeks all played a vital part in God's purposes. When we have a heart for God's Kingdom above all else, we will value others as partners rather than fearing them as competitors.

It's all about people

One thing I love about the Acts 11 passage is that the message of the good news of Jesus was carried by the nameless ones! There was no brilliant strategic plan at play here, humanly speaking. Simply ordinary disciples, pushed and pulled by circumstance, yet open to God's Holy Spirit and being witnesses wherever they found themselves. And guess what, the Lord's hand was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

As we find ourselves in uncharted territory today, as disciples and churches, I want us to keep sight of the fact that the body of Christ – the nameless ones – are still the ones entrusted with the good news of Jesus. Buildings, services, programmes and plans

can all help, but they can never be as vital as each one of us being a witness wherever we find ourselves. Today the Church needs to renew her focus on being communities of disciples who worship, witness and love. God works through ordinary people like you and me, always has and always will. This is key to our future.

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Roots and Wings

Another thing that particularly stuck with me from this passage is the relationship between those who were scattered and those who remained. When we read in Acts 11:22 that news got back to the church in Jerusalem, there is almost an, "uh oh!" moment – with the fear of what's coming to them! Preaching to Greeks also... are they going to be in big trouble now? But do you see what happens? The first response of the Jerusalem church is to send Barnabas (after all, it's all about people). And then we get a glimpse of a beautiful thing; Barnabas *looks* and *listens* for evidence of the grace of God and then *encourages* them to remain true. The church in Jerusalem provided roots and continuity in a time of huge upheaval and change, yet they also had a gracious heart to be open to the new. I don't see them being controlling here. Rather, they were willing to be open to some wild new stuff involving Gentiles and Greeks and they encouraged and supported the church in Antioch as it worked out what church looked like in a

different cultural setting. And do you know what? A great number of people were brought to the Lord.

This is so relevant for us right now. I believe we need loads of this mature, wise and generous heartedness in the journey ahead. This passage reminds us that there is a valuable role for those who remain and keep us rooted, while others are scattered and spreading their wings. Those who remain can look and listen for evidence of God's grace rather than being in broadcast mode about what has worked in a different era. Those who remain can encourage and support those who are grappling with issues and questions that seem alien to them. Those who are scattered and navigating uncharted territory can welcome the insight and encouragement of those who remain. Those who are scattered can carry the Gospel not only to new places but into new cultures too.

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God has blessed us with a rich heritage as a movement. Strong roots of relationship and common purpose. Agile wings of creativity and innovation. As we embrace both these strengths we will flourish and adapt as a movement and glorify Jesus.

Partnership

This sort of Kingdom partnership means being confident in your own gift and call (as a church or disciple) and blessing and releasing others into their gift and call too. It means allowing each one to be different, yet play their part. It means valuing and honouring the beautiful creativity of God's Holy Spirit. And this is not just about giving, it's also about receiving. In Acts 11 we see the generous sharing of people and resources. Teachers, pastors and prophets all play their part here. What we don't see is people 'defending their corner', we don't see a jealous spirit and we don't see a 'not invented here' mentality. We see believers working together, encouraging each other and releasing each other to flourish because they had a heart for God's Kingdom above all else. Partners not competitors.

(Re) Learning Points

So, somewhat battered and weary, we find ourselves being called deeper into a new and different season of uncertainty and opportunity.

Remember that the Lord knows you and your situation. Trust him and embrace this new season as best you can. Whether you are one who is called to remain, or one who is scattered and navigating uncharted territory, remember you are valued and part of God's purposes.

Remember it's all about people. Be a disciple, and be part of a

discipling community and let church discover new expressions through that. Be thankful for our roots and the ways they help to orientate us in these uncertain times. Graciously perceive and encourage the new wings that will help us to take flight and flourish in new ways. Bless one another and remember that we are partners and not competitors because we have a heart for God's Kingdom above all else.

As we find ourselves in uncharted territory today, as disciples and churches, I want us to keep sight of the fact that the body of Christ – the nameless ones – are still the ones entrusted with the good news of Jesus.



Lynn Green is General Secretary of our Baptist Union