

The monthly message from Jonathan Edwards, the General Secretary of The Baptist Union of Great Britain -

The hard work of listening

Listening sounds easy. On the face of it all you have to do is sit there! It doesn't apparently involve the sweat and exertion of hard manual work. However, anyone who has seriously listened to another person will know that it is an intensely demanding activity. As you listen you are drawn into the other person's perceptions, emotions, hopes and needs. There is a distinct possibility that their approach to life is radically different from your own and every likelihood that some of their attitudes will annoy you and disappoint you. Listening can be deeply enriching and even life transforming but it is never short of demanding.

As a denomination we are seeking to listen at the moment. More than 1,600 people have responded to the online survey concerning Baptist Futures. This is a superb result and I am deeply grateful for this deep level of engagement. There will be many other opportunities for us to share our hopes and dreams for our life together as Baptists over the coming months. And this whole creative process demands that we are committed to a deep level of listening which involves a generosity and humility of spirit and a confidence that we will hear God speak through one another. To be sure there are hundreds of different views about the future. This should neither surprise us nor depress us, but it does underline the need to listen so carefully to one another that we are able to discern what God is saying. And we need to continually remind one another and encourage one another with the knowledge that God is definitely speaking to us as a denomination and he will be faithful in leading us forward.

One of the major opportunities that we have for listening to God together is our Baptist Assembly. Year by year we hear God speaking to us and this year we have a very special need to hear his voice. The fact that we are marking 400 years of our history will make this year's Assembly a very special occasion, but it will be particularly important because of the present conversations about the life of the Baptist Union. I do hope that you will make every effort to join us at Westminster Central Hall from May 4th to 6th. You will find the details on the Baptist Assembly website.

So far I have looked at the national dimension but let's think local for a moment. Healthy local church life absolutely depends on deep and sympathetic listening. Ministers often reflect with me on the growing complexity of life these days. The fragmentation of family life and the ever increasing insecurity of employment have had profound impacts on our churches, and they mean that people bring enormous burdens with them into the life of our fellowships. This is a massive privilege, but also a very great responsibility and every local church needs to prize the precious gift of listening and ensure that there are good opportunities for people to listen deeply to one another.

We live in a society that makes listening increasingly difficult. The world is busy, noisy and clamorous and we are constantly tempted to avoid the hard work of listening. I hope that we will, individually and as a denomination, accept the challenge to become more careful listeners this year ... and to do so with the confidence of knowing that God will speak, just as he has done throughout the 400 years of our Baptist history, and the 2000 years of his church.