

The “Snooze Button” ...

As the longer winter nights approach, the temptation to press the “snooze button” is increasingly attractive in order to enjoy the duvet a little longer and avoid facing the challenges that a nippy new day holds.

By now we all hear alarm bells ringing clearly at the state of the church in the UK and in particular the Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF) crisis in the Church of England. Beyond the general alarm, individual churches in different contexts could find themselves in “heightened alarm situations” at as we did as a church when considering our relationship with our Bishop last year as we faced the renewal of our Bishop’s Mission Order.

The temptation to keep one’s head down, and delay the difficult decision of rousing oneself to action (or to *another season* of action) is strong. Deciding what to do in the light of PLF is complex, costly and challenging on top of all the normal headaches of everyday life and ministry and we are tempted to hope this all goes away. But ignoring alarms is never a good thing (as I discovered on the day of handing in my university dissertation)!

As a church leadership we found the following biblical commands helpful in navigating a way forward through some tricky terrain, and a helpful stimulus to action. They are offered here as a checklist to think through how each of us is responding and to prepare us for the conversations we may have publicly and privately at the conference...

1) Shepherd. Acts 20:28 *“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers”*. Those in pastoral ministry (lay and ordained) are to shepherd the flock under the chief Shepherd, carefully feeding them the good Word of God. What will you need to teach, and from which part of God’s Word, and in what contexts in order to shepherd the flock through these difficult days? We found preaching through Genesis 1-4 and 1 Timothy relevant. Others have found a short series in Jude very helpful.

2) Contend. Jude 1:3. *“Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God’s holy people”*. None of us signed up for this specific battle or particularly wanted to stick our necks out regarding its presenting issue of sexuality, but non-engagement is simply not a biblical response. What actions are you discussing with your leadership and congregation at the moment? What is the next phase of protesting at a diocesan and deanery level or in your specific context?

3) Separate. Romans 16:17 *“I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them”*. A different gospel that underplays repentance is being preached in our nation and unless we differentiate visibly from it (graciously but clearly), our church members, friends and neighbours will believe that it is our gospel. How will you demonstrate your distance from the divisive this term, and explain your reasons for doing so? This will be costly, but necessary.

4) Unite. Ephesians 4:3 *“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace”*. In any crisis, especially when different people are inclined to act in different ways, there’s a real need to pray for and work to maintain the unity which is the gift of God. This will take time and energy both within our congregations and with fellow believers outside. We found time with local ReNew leaders for joint PCC meetings, clergy gatherings and personal advice invaluable. Others have created alternative deanery structures. Which zoom calls are you going to resolve to attend? Who, at church, are you going to need to book up to chat with next?

5) Respect Conscience. Romans 14:13 *“Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister”*. Conscience can be calibrated and educated by the Word of God, but conscience should not be suppressed or overridden. There may come a point (as there was for us) when we feel that we are in a spiritual partnership that is a spiritual compromise. Are you paying attention to the conscience warning lights? Your own and those of others?

These are not easy commands to obey simultaneously and each church situation has a unique context and makeup, but with the Spirit’s help (not least working through one another’s prayers and counsel), it will be great to come together at ReNew 2024 to lament the situation we face, but to do so with hope and confidence in the Saviour who has promised to build his Church.

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