

time out

Drew Gibson offers a radical option for professionals under pressure

To describe health professionals as 'busy people' is rather like describing Pavarotti as 'a nice singer'. Doctors, in particular, necessarily embrace a life of physical and emotional pressure which most other people simply cannot appreciate. This is particularly true in the first few years. How many times have you heard your Christian colleagues say that their early years were a time of working flat out, when their devotional life and Christian health came under severe pressure? Can I make a radical suggestion for these difficult times? Why not take six months out?

Could it be possible to jump off the moving walkway and pause to look around for a while before jumping on again? Spending three or four years running from job to job and pillar to post is physically tiring and emotionally and spiritually draining. A short course at a Bible college may be a heaven-sent opportunity to sleep (at night, not during lectures), pray, study the Bible, talk out problems with a sympathetic listener and reflect on where you might be heading.

In my work teaching at Belfast Bible College I often notice that those who benefit most from our courses have seen something of life. They reflect on their experiences, theologise about what they have been doing and develop fresh approaches to familiar problems. It is also an opportunity to recharge their spiritual batteries and relax in a supportive spiritual atmosphere. So what could health professionals in particular gain from a term at Bible college?

Five benefits from Bible college

1. You may never have had the time or energy to do any consistent, relaxed theological thinking about the ethical issues in your area - maybe abortion, human fertilisation or birth control. You may have started to fall into spirals of compromise or callousness. Time away from the pressures of urgent decision making and time spent reading and writing about what you have already experienced at the sharp end offer an opportunity to develop a foundation for future actions which is both biblical and practical.
2. You may take courses in counselling to help deal with emotionally fragile patients. You may take courses in Christian mission to explore opportunities for service overseas or to understand work in the NHS as an expression of Christian mission.
3. You will spend time studying the Bible for its own sake and applying your substantial intellect to the Scriptures in new and exciting ways. Too many professionals with fine, agile minds have an approach to the Bible which is woefully simplistic and are spiritually childish as a consequence.
4. You will create space for quietness, prayer and meditation.

Time to let the mind wander, time to talk to God, and time to listen to God. Perhaps you will develop patterns of devotional living which will stand you in good stead for the rest of your life.

5. You will discover a community of worship. Many students find richness in new patterns of worship. Your circumstances may have dictated that attendance at Sunday worship has been infrequent. Perhaps the church you attend has not exactly been bursting with spiritual life. A term at Bible college may inject new life and new approaches.

Drawbacks

Of course there are drawbacks to this 'career break'. The most obvious is financial; six months of lost earnings is not to be ignored. Some judicious saving beforehand, willingness to forgo some luxuries during study, and even a year or two paying off a small loan afterwards would be far from impossible. College fees are by no means prohibitive. At £875, the fees for a three month course at the college where I teach are less than the cost of most family holidays, less than one tenth of the cost of an average family car, and a small percentage of the cost of the next house you will buy.

For many people, financial difficulties are not the greatest problem. In many specialties competition for jobs is fierce. Applicants must give the impression that the job they are seeking has been their ambition from the womb. A CV showing six months at Bible college may be seen as a sign of low commitment. It depends how you present the time you have spent. Some specialties view stepping out positively. Innovative and lateral thinking, risk taking, self motivated study and self improvement are all desirable qualities to bring to your specialty. Skills gained at Bible college, like counselling or a well-founded critique of contemporary social patterns, can only add strength and depth to a healthcare team.

A radical re-orientation?

A term in Bible college may trigger a radical re-orientation of your career values. Unthinkable as it may seem to the upwardly mobile SHO, rising to the top of the cardiothoracic surgery ladder may not be the ultimate goal in life after all. Perhaps God has other plans.

If God calls us to step off the ladder, surely he is perfectly capable of providing for us if he calls us to step back on to the ladder again? He will either restore to us what we have set aside for a while or he will move us in a new direction by opening new opportunities. Time out might be just the way to rekindle your personal spiritual life and to start breathing life back into the healthcare system in the UK and beyond.

Drew Gibson teaches at Belfast Bible College and is married to a doctor