

Looking back to look forwards

Mark Pickering considers how understanding the past gives us strength for the future

Do not say, 'Why were the old days better than these?' For it is not wise to ask such questions. (Ecclesiastes 7:10)

Times are bad. Children no longer obey their parents, and everyone is writing a book. (Cicero, c43BC)

Digging into the archives has become something of a passion for me. It is always encouraging to see what our forebears did in the service of Christ in the medical and nursing professions. But a love of history can become a vice as well as a virtue.

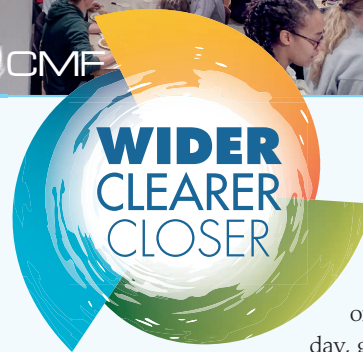
Two besetting sins dog us as we grow longer in the tooth. One is to see the past in a halcyon glow. 'Remember when...' becomes one of our favourite conversation openers. We edit our memories, looking back to when prices were cheaper, the summers were warmer, society's values godlier, and life less complicated. Consequently, we decry the present and become fearful of the future. This is the sin of nostalgia.

The other is a celebration of the new and the innovative at the expense of our history. We develop a forward, future-facing orientation that forgets or dismisses history as irrelevant. We believe that we are the first generation to rise to the challenges before us. We have the answers, and we will put things right. This is the sin of foolhardiness and hubris.

The failure of those who fall for the sin of nostalgia is that we even ask the question, 'why aren't things as they were in the good old days?'. It forgets all God has done and shown us on the way. As CMF's founder, Douglas Johnson wrote: *'it is inexcusable for a Christian to neglect history'*. The sin of foolhardy hubris is almost precisely the same – only here we dismiss as irrelevant or even non-existent all we have to learn of what God did in previous generations. Both are sins because they place our emotional connection to past, present, and future ahead of the God of all time, who holds everything in his hands.

The past is the humus, the compost of experience out of which we grow. The future is not to be feared because we have roots deeply embedded in God's faithfulness in our lives. And not just our lives but also the lives of those who have come before us, back to Abraham and Noah. This also means we have a secure base to understand the present – to see what the Spirit is doing and join with him.

Perhaps the most unprecedented thing about the COVID-19 pandemic was the unprecedented use of the word *unprecedented* in all the media commentary! The same may be said about the other crises that have followed over the last few years. Nostalgia and hubris would tell us things were better before this, that we never had to deal with plagues, wars, economic crises, and fuel shortages in the past. We become deluded into believing that what we face



today is without precedent. Nostalgia fears where things are going, and hubris struggles to find the answers but believe that the future must be better. Godly wisdom tells us that things can get worse and stay bad for a long time, but God remains faithful. There is always a way through the present darkness. We may be living on Easter Saturday, but we know that with the dawn of Easter Sunday, things will change in marvellous ways!

In this autumn's *Triple Helix*, I have written about the history of the nineteenth-century medical mission movements that helped inspire and give birth to CMF. It is striking how some rose quickly, burned brightly, but soon collapsed, or faded away over time. Others are with us to this day, growing, changing, and adapting. We still have a lot

to learn from those who went before us. But we are not constrained by that history – because God did not stop working when the twentieth century dawned. Where is he leading us today? What is the Spirit doing in our day and age, and how do we join him?

One thing we have learned is that spiritual resilience is vital. We have researched what makes for resilient disciples of Christ among CMF members and how CMF's ministry can help foster such resilience.¹ You'll see examples of that in this edition of *CMF News*.

Another is that we see the power of building community. CMF can never replace the fellowship of the local church. But we are building local networks uniquely placed to support Christians in the workplace through work-based fellowships and specialist Christian communities of practice. As the author of Ecclesiastes reminds us, *'Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labour: if either of them falls down, one can help the other up.'* (Ecclesiastes 4:10-11)

As we look back, around, and forward, CMF's three-year (now five-year) strategy to go wider, clearer, and closer seems more relevant than ever. Please join us in the coming year to go **wider** by drawing in new members to the fellowship. Help our communication to be **clearer** by spreading the word to colleagues and friends about all we are doing. Help us to grow **closer** by getting involved with local workplace fellowships, Catalyst teams, or specialist networks.

To quote another famous author who understood the power of history to shape the present and the future: *"I wish none of this had happened." "So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us."* (JRR Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*)

Mark Pickering is CMF Chief Executive.

references (accessed 4/10/22)

1. Rayel I, Greenall J. Factors Contributing to Resilient Discipleship in Healthcare. *CMF*. September 2002. cmf.li/ResilientDisciple