

Distinctives: promise & purpose

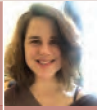
Sally Barker describes one CMF group's response to the COVID-19 pandemic



I've recently become the Pastoral Secretary for my university CMF group. This role usually involves organising weekly prayer lunches for our pre-clinical students, as well as all the fun of helping out at Fresher mingles, Text-a-Toasties and our Cookie for a Question tables with the CU.

But planning for the year ahead is suddenly a lot

more complex than usual (and personally, I found it complex enough as it was!). Masks, distancing, maximum numbers, no catering, etc. These are necessary restrictions that keep us and others safe. However, we can't deny the frustrations they bring, perhaps especially when we think of our faith, families and fellowship.



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How can we possibly be CMF as we know it when we have so many restrictions?

I found the answer by turning to Philippians 1:12-26. The letter to the Philippian church was written by Paul during a time of imprisonment, most likely during the two years of house arrest described at the very end of Acts, around 60–62 AD. Some might say he was somewhat restricted by his circumstances. However, Paul used these very restrictions to fulfil one of our primary purposes as Christians; to witness and lead others to Christ.¹ He adapted by adopting an alternative form of communication; no longer able to testify and encourage in person, he wrote letters (including Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon). Not to mention the fact that we, as followers of Christ, are able to access the Word of God through Paul's writings nearly two thousand years later. Paul was without doubt living his best 'lockdown life'.

On the other hand, it can be hard to see such opportunities in our current situations – or hard to act on them when we do see them. Yet that in no way means that God can't work through us.

I recently spent time volunteering on a COVID ward as a ward assistant. My colleagues and I quickly realised that the masks make it extremely difficult for any of the patients to identify us, hear us or generally get to know us. A frustrating restriction! However, the patients quickly began to identify us using other means. For example, one nurse was known for her hair, which was dyed in a rainbow pattern. My friend Beth became known for eyeshadow designs, which became more elaborate by the day and developed according to patients' requests for glitter and stars. For me, it was a cross necklace. I've worn it every day since my second year of medical school but it has never been commented on by a patient before. During COVID, it suddenly became my identifier. As a result, I think I spoke more about the cross in those short months than in my four years as a member of CMF.

So yes, in this moment we face restrictions. We

can't throw a potluck to welcome our freshers and we can't offer toasties and cookies in return for a genuine conversation about faith. However, we must remember that our purpose is to unite and equip doctors and nurses to live and speak for Jesus Christ – a purpose that is God-given. We trust that God establishes our steps and, as long as we submit our motivations and pride to him, he will provide all we need to accomplish his purposes.

However, I love this passage in Philippians because it not only shows the purpose of Christianity, it also reminds us of the promise. That whilst we were put here on purpose and for a purpose, we are grounded in his promise, which is affirmed all the way from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22.

The promise is eternal life with God, the Son and the Spirit for those who believe. This promise is comfort as we grieve those we have lost. This promise is hope and a certainty in the chaos of our current situation; and courage, in a time when fear is our bread-and-butter. Because Jesus loves us while we're grieving. Jesus knew grief. Jesus loves us when we're fearful. He calmed the storm. Jesus loves us when we're lonely. He died so that we can spend eternity with our Father. There is no self-improvement, achievement or status required. God is for us and will continue to work in and through us to fulfil his purposes, no matter how weak we may feel.

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me. (Philippians 1:21-26) ■

REF

1. Philippians 1:13