

CONTENTED LEADERSHIP

BY LIZ CARTER

'Contentment? I'll try and aim for that one day, maybe,' says the busy, harried church worker, her mind too full of all that crams in to even think on the word. It can sometimes seem like a faraway concept, can't it? Something to be reached one day; perhaps when we are retired, perhaps even further on than that – especially in church leadership. It can seem out of reach in our everyday, messy, sometimes painful experiences. We are too busy, or too overwhelmed, or simply too tired to even think about contentment, let alone be contented. We'll save it until a time we are able to reflect, a time when things are better, and easier, and simpler.

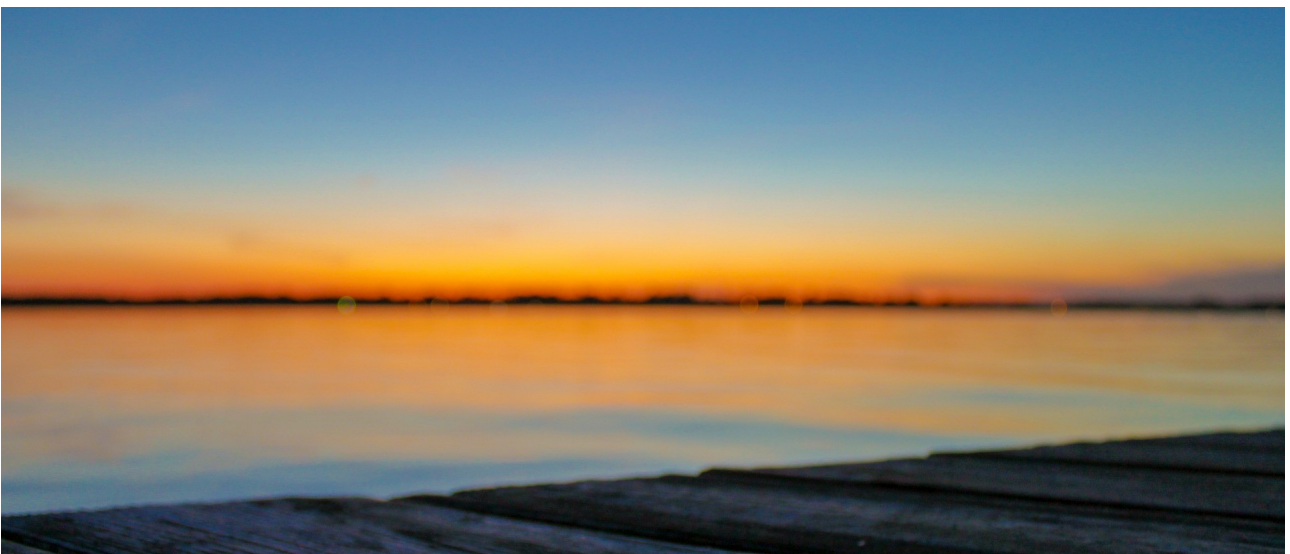
CONTENTMENT IS FOR PERFECT LIVES...?

We're often sold this idea of contentment: we can be contented when life is going well, when we are healthy,

when there is less mess in the way. Our social media feeds tell us that we can get it when our lives look a little more perfect. If our lives are sparkly and photogenic, then we're making it to contentment. Adverts entice us in with the promise that buying that thing will afford more happiness to us, or doing that activity will enhance our lives. But the promises so often end up as an empty echo of something unreal, churning us up more than bringing us peace.

WHOLE = HEALED = CONTENT...?

Are we guilty of promoting a version of this story in our churches, as well? Do we promise that God will bring us a life of happiness and contentment only when we get more whole and more fixed up? As a chronically ill person, sick all of my life, I've experienced something of this. All around me it seems that people want to



provide solutions for painful situations. Yet there are circumstances which are not going to be made better, or not immediately, anyway. There are problems which will not be solved and illnesses which will not be healed. But is it possible that contentment can be found anyway, that we don't have to wait for things to get fixed? Is it possible that Jesus meant something else by 'fullness of life'?

THE SECRET OF CONTENTMENT

The apostle Paul makes an intriguing statement: he has 'found the secret to being content in every situation' (Philippians 4:12). Paul's leadership experience was of hardship and pain, of persecution and chaos. He wrote the book of Philippians from house arrest, under threat of execution. He saw his friends and co-workers tortured and murdered for their faith. And yet he'd come to a place where he could talk of contentment. It is clear that he didn't mean contentment in the way we might take the word – he wasn't thinking of a day on the beach in the sunshine, or curled up by an open fire, with all well in the world. He wasn't equating contentment with complacency. He was talking of something much more profound, and far more powerful.

A DYNAMIC CHOICE

So many leaders are living in pain and suffering, whether physically, mentally or spiritually, and feel there is no way to escape their painful present. Yet we can receive hope through Paul's words, because they are words which pierce through the darkness and draw us to God's glorious light within our circumstances, rather than offering a certain way out.

Paul found what he called 'peace that transcends understanding' (verse 7), a peace which goes beyond the need to fill our lives with things or relationships or fixes. He discovered this peace when he looked to Christ instead of focusing on himself and his own difficulties, making an active

choice to pray and praise. Paul didn't find that contentment simply happened to him as a result of following Christ, but wrote that he'd learned it as a process – he had put dynamic work into it.

REJOICING IS CHOOSING CONTENTMENT

As leaders, we are called to model the kind of holy contentment that Paul was talking about. This means making the same choices Paul made; choices about looking to the good (verses 8-9) and rejoicing in God always (verse 4). This can seem impossible, especially when there doesn't seem a lot to rejoice about – when things are going wrong in our churches, when the enemy appears to be triumphing. Yet it's a command Paul gave to a church who were tiny and under severe threat, so it wasn't something he was saying to people who had rose-tinted lives.

Perhaps we need to find new ways of thinking about 'rejoice'. Could rejoice mean lament, in some situations? Could rejoice mean sharing pain and laying it before the cross? Could it mean opening ourselves up in new ways, laying our pain out before others?

I'm so grateful for the encouragement given throughout the Bible to be real about where we are. Our churches and our communities are searching for authenticity, and in my experience, respond so much more to leaders who are willing to share vulnerability and weakness, who speak freely about difficulties. People are grateful that they have experience to resonate with and barriers are broken down.

'Rejoice' isn't a mask of fake happiness in the biblical narrative, but a courageous decision to express gratitude within the journey we are walking. Rejoice is a command which soothes us in our circumstances by raising our eyes toward the one we rejoice in.

DISAPPOINTMENT IS COURAGEOUS CONTENTMENT

Finding contentment in Christ doesn't mean we are never disappointed, and doesn't mean we should suppress that disappointment. My life is a string of disappointments; the most recent being when my book launch week was spent sick in hospital instead of celebrating with family and friends.

Life as church leaders can be filled with all kinds of disappointments – so much can go wrong, or be less than we hope. There is much precedent in scripture to lay our disappointment out before God, to scream out our pain, knowing that God will take it. Being honest with God about our disappointment is, ironically, part of choosing contentment, because instead of holding on to the bitterness, we are looking to God and releasing it to God. That's when Paul's inexplicable peace comes hurtling in – not because we are disappointed, but because of what we do with it.

THE STORY WE CAN TELL

These stories society and church can tell about contentment –



stories which tell us we will get it if we do better or get better things – are narratives which feed into the great need we all have for relationship with God, the only thing which fills up the void in us and soothes us in our deepest souls.

We have a better story to tell about contentment; a story of hope and blazing, glorious light, a story of upside-down grace and a God who reaches out to the hurting – where they are. A God who can take our stark disappointment, who values our raw authenticity, and who cascades peace upon us; peace which soothes the wildest places in us.

We have that better story for ourselves, too, in our own ministries. Let's reach out for it and catch it, take time to learn it, take our eyes off us and pin them on the one who longs to fill us with inexpressible joy. Let's hold out our hands for the contentment which isn't a transient feeling, but a lifelong action; a fierce pursuit of Christ in and among the ruins and the agony.

Liz's book [Catching Contentment](#) was published at the end of 2018.

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FOR REFLECTION

1. What do you think about when you hear the word 'contentment'? How does Paul's use of the word speak to you?
2. Have you come across any teaching/ethos which seems to point to the idea that we can only become contented when God has eased our lives and fixed our pain? How do you think we can get past this kind of narrative and speak more directly into messy and painful lives?
3. How easy is it for you to be authentic and vulnerable about your own struggles with those you lead? Ask God to give you wisdom about how to share your life with others.
4. Do you hold some disappointment you need to lay out before God? Take some time to do this, using Psalm 42 to help put into words some of the desolation you have been experiencing. Ask for God to pour out peace beyond understanding as you share your pain.

