

LEAD ON

HOW TO STAY ENCOURAGED (WHEN THERE'S THE POTENTIAL FOR THINGS TO REALLY GET YOU DOWN)

BY SARAH PIX, CPAS LEADERSHIP ENABLER

My family and I have recently discovered a series on Netflix which we are all enjoying (we are realising that this in itself is not always easy in a multi-generational household). Celebrity Bear Hunt sees a group of celebrities camped out in the Costa Rican forest (beautiful) undertaking a series of Bear Grylls prescribed challenges (let your imagination run wild).

To the victors there are the spoils of a comfortable-ish night and a good meal. But those that do not overcome in the forest are then consigned to the Bear Pit where they have an hour to outwit the Bear himself, using all of their stealth, skill, stamina and psychological resilience. If they let their guard down, they are caught and risk leaving the competition.

When they are in the Bear Pit, they don't have the support and comfort and encouragement of their teammates – they are alone, they are relentlessly pursued, and by all accounts it is a very exposing and frightening place to be. As I watch, I find myself wondering how I would fare in such a demanding situation.

We live in perplexing times. There is much going on in the Church and the world which is disorientating and potentially discouraging. There is the backdrop of revelations of historic abuse in the Church, the complex and painful decisions around LFF, and a nation walking away from God. This all compounds the other stressors that are a part of our daily lives. Factor in the regular, daily demands of leading multiple churches and congregations – complexities of leadership, tough decisions to make, sabotage and

conflict, difficult conversations, fewer volunteers, financial scarcity, uncertainty about the future – and you may find that you resonate with the Bear Pit experience.

Despite all this we know that Jesus is Lord, that God is good and that nothing is impossible for him. But the victories can feel distant and few at times. A little look at the Living Ministry Report bear out some of these struggles. How do we stay encouraged in this season of 'multiple overwhelms'?

I have been struck by the story of David in 1 Samuel 30. David had experienced the devastating blow of the raid on Ziklag, when the families of David and his men were taken captive. Verse 4 describes how they 'wept aloud until they had no strength left to weep'. Discouragement doesn't begin to capture it. Then David faced the revolt of his men who were looking for an outlet for their own fear and anger. And then at the end of verse 6 we read 'But David found encouragement in



the Lord' (sometimes translated 'David strengthened himself in the Lord').

Here are seven suggestions for keeping encouraged in the face of discouraging circumstances.

1. LEARN TO FIND ENCOURAGEMENT IN THE LORD

This means reminding yourself of whose you are – you belong to the King, a dearly loved child of God, before anything else, or any role you occupy. Somebody in a training session I offered described the need for leaders to be 'self-saucing puddings' – by which she meant we shouldn't rely only on the affirmation of others, but need to be able to find our peace, security and encouragement in our relationship with God.

Don't misunderstand – we need others (see below) – but we need to be so rooted in Christ that he is the source of all these things. The Psalmist understood this: 'One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.' (Psalm 27:4); 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall lack nothing' (Psalm 23:1).

2. FIND A WAY TO CONNECT WITH THE TRANSCENDENCE AND POWER OF GOD

This will help to lift your eyes above the day to day details and complexity of your circumstances to see beyond, and will grow faith in you. For me, that is connecting with a leadership network from a Pentecostal denomination. For you it might mean connecting with Cathedral worship, or an occasional Greek Orthodox service.

3. SEEK OUT STORIES OF HOW GOD HAS MOVED BEFORE

Of course the Scriptures are an abundant source of such stories. I think of Joseph, who despite the promise of God over his life, circumstances seemed to be taking him in the opposite direction to the promise. But he was faithful even when he didn't understand. There are many other stories and modern-day testimonies of how God has redeemed difficult and painful things for good. If he's done it before, he can do it again. This is what it means to rehearse the wonders of God, and this is a rich part of our heritage. It is a way to 'banish fear and doubt' – the enemies of courage.

4. BE AROUND ENCOURAGING PEOPLE

People who will bring courage, cheer you on and help you to lift up your eyes. Sometimes we find ourselves in isolating places, as David did in this passage, but wherever possible, speaking to someone who is faith-filled and outside of the direct situation will bring perspective and remind you of truth. It also helps if you

can belly-laugh together. Laughter is excellent medicine. You know those kinds of conversations that you walk away from and you have a smile on your face? 'Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard' (Malachi 3:16).

5. LEARN TO LOOK FOR SIGNS OF GOD AT WORK

So often we celebrate the big wins, the obvious victories, but Jesus always described the kingdom in terms of something small and insignificant that grows. It's all too easy for us as human beings to focus on what's not going right, our struggles, scarcity and failures, and to miss what God is doing in the midst of it all. So celebrate when there is a stranger in the congregation, when a child asks to be confirmed, when somebody prays aloud for the first time, or offers a previously hidden gift or talent to the body of Christ. Treasure and steward these small beginnings, and watch them grow in the multiplying economy of God.

6. BE AN ENCOURAGER

It's one of those lovely kingdom paradoxes, that encouraging others leaves us feeling encouraged. And by endeavouring to be a non-anxious presence (or a less-anxious presence at least), our own levels of anxiety will reduce.

7. REMEMBER THAT ENCOURAGEMENT IS ABOUT GROWING MORE COURAGEOUS

Encouragement brings resilience in the face of less than ideal circumstances, giving you the resources to keep going with the things that God has called you to. Is there a step that you need to take next? Immediately after the terrible raid at Ziklag, David enquired of the Lord as to what his next step should be. He laid the situation before God and asked for guidance. When God showed him, he was obedient and recovered everyone that the Amalekites had stolen. That took courage, but the terrible loss was turned to victory.

Be encouraged. The Lord is with you in the Bear Pit.

REFLECT ON THESE QUESTIONS

- What does it look like for you to 'encourage yourself in the Lord'?
- Ask God to give you the eyes to seek signs of his kingdom breaking in, however small those green shoots might appear just now. Take time to record them.
- Where might you go to be reminded of how great and glorious our God is?