

Dear Friends,

Some of you have heard me recount how my late father was an amateur astronomer. He belonged to the British Astronomical Association, and I initially learned the letters of the Greek alphabet (handy later for studying the New Testament) as a child from a BAA journal.

He also once took me to a Saturday morning meeting at their Piccadilly headquarters where a learned lecturer spoke way above my head. However, the person sitting at a table checking in the attendees when we arrived was none other than someone with whom I shared a birthday, namely Patrick Moore. After the meeting, I think more people queued up to ask Patrick Moore questions than the guest speaker. What was so striking about Moore was the way he treated the children's questions with equal seriousness to those of the adults.

This love of astronomy meant that together we watched hour after hour of TV coverage of the Apollo space missions, with Patrick Moore (again) and the wonderful James Burke.

One thing I vividly remember from those Apollo missions was when the capsule was about to enter the Earth's atmosphere on return. All communication would be lost for a time, and the heat bearing down on the tiny capsule was fearsome. Re-entry was dangerous.

And so 're-entry' is my theme for this letter. It's the last of the guest circuit pastoral letters before Keith returns from his sabbatical and I hand the Superintendency back to him. Some of the Methodist literature about ministers' sabbaticals talks about the danger of re-entry, and how it must be managed well.

Why is re-entry dangerous? Because congregations and church members will be so glad to see the returning minister that they splurge one thing after another onto them all at once, putting on such pressure and expectation that the benefits of the sabbatical can be lost overnight.

I therefore want to use this final letter to appeal to the whole circuit: please be gentle, kind, and patient with Keith and Hilary as they re-enter our atmosphere. You do not have to tell them everything at once. You do not have to load expectations on them immediately. Maybe let them make the first move in asking for information and updates.

I say this with real feeling. I have had three sabbaticals in my ministry. In each one, I have encountered issues that have damaged re-entry, ranging from a Circuit Treasurer who mismanaged funds to people causing trouble over health issues that had arisen during my three months away.

Keith and Hilary need to be refreshed and recharged for their own sakes as well as ours. Let's all play our part to ensure they have a safe re-entry and a gentle splashdown.

Finally, let me say it has been a privilege to act as your Superintendent for these last three and a half months. Before he left, I heard Keith say that he wanted you to accord me the same respect as you would any full-time Superintendent. Well, that was certainly my experience. Thank you.

And it has been good to oversee the circuit alongside my ministerial colleagues, stipendiary, non-stipendiary, and supernumerary, along with our excellent team of circuit stewards led so ably by Linda Weedon, and our amazing circuit administrator, Sue Howson.

Given the way I started this letter, I'll close with some verses from the Psalms. It won't be difficult for you to guess why my father loved these words:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

(Psalm 8:3-4)

Grace and peace in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dave Faulkner". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

Dave Faulkner