

THE JOY OF SERVICE

Julian Hardyman

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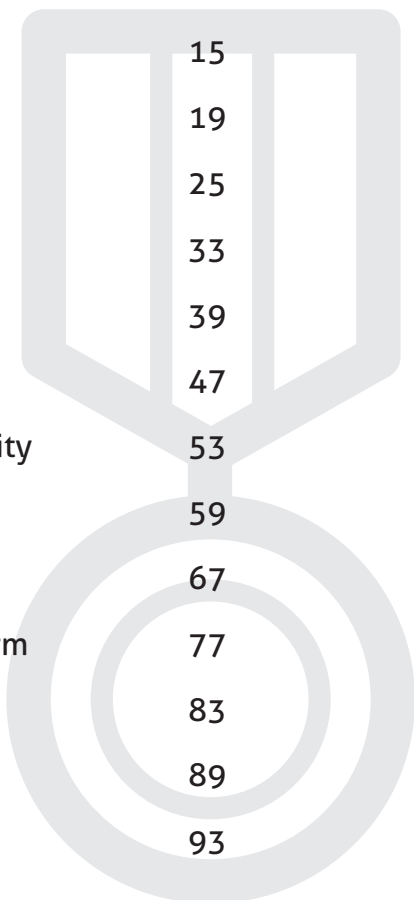
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FOREWORD



Writing this little book has helped me retrieve some important memories; to refresh my sense of the privilege of my work as a pastor; to remind myself of the living reality of the powerful love which has entered my life in Christ; and above all to remind myself that serving Christ really is joyful. I have been a member of a number of churches but it is from my time as pastor of Eden Baptist Church that I have drawn most deeply in writing this book. The dear Eden folk have been patient with me and taught me a great deal. I owe them so much and love them more and more every passing year. I also want to mention my dear wife Debbie, and my children, Robin, Fiona and Kitty. Without Debbie's commitment I would have bailed out of ministry on several occasions and might never have got started in the first place! She has been with me through all the experiences described here and has been a great source of strength. My children have played their part too, both in patience and encouragement. The dedication is to my sister and brother-in-law, who have been kind and supportive in so many ways, including enabling me to find productive solitude in two very different places for writing and thinking and prayer. In addition, John has helped me by repeatedly pushing me towards an optimistic outlook more in keeping with our hope in Christ than my natural pessimism and anxiety. That has been a very great gift.

INTRODUCTION



'I've been in pastoral ministry for over 30 years and it has been full of joy.'

The speaker was an experienced pastor called Robert. He'd been invited to our church to help us sort out a painful and intractable mess. Relationships were on edge. Wounds had been opened which were raw and painful. The leadership was divided. People weren't getting on. The future of the church was quite unclear. Confusion and suspicion hung in the air like a toxic fog.

Something was wrong. Perhaps more than one thing was wrong. And we'd all realised we weren't able to sort it out without outside help.

Three years before, I'd gone to my first elders' meeting. It felt quite unlike the relaxed, brotherly elders' meetings at the church where I had worked before. When I went home I said to my wife, 'Something's not right.' The three years that had followed sometimes (not always) felt like walking in bare feet over broken glass.

So when I heard what Robert said about joy, my first thought was: 'Oh yeah?' But he was someone who commanded respect, so I shelved my scepticism to watch him at work and see what I could learn.

Now, in my early 50s, I can echo his words.

I truly can. 'I've been in pastoral ministry for over 20 years and it has been full of joy.' It really has. Greater joy than I think I imagined possible. Joy that is not a single point or moment but, as I recall it, is like a set of photos of a whole variety of holiday landscapes – hugely varied, all striking and beautiful. And those are the predominant memories of those years.

But as I have hinted, those are not the only memories. The story is more varied than that. My inner photo library also has pictures of some dark, sad and tense scenes. Scenes of broken objects and broken people, memories of emotional muscles aching because they had been pushed too far. Scenes of shame or pain, which I would rather not dwell on either because I sinned or because the ripples from someone else's shortcoming touched me. Times of deep weariness. Times when all I felt was emptiness. Times when I wished this was someone else's responsibility and even wished I wasn't.

So it has been a joy, but not an undiluted one. There's been both sin and pain, often connected. While I regret my sin, I have learned from it, from the way it has broken me and shown me more grace.

While I do wonder occasionally at just how hard things have been sometimes, I don't wish it had been easier or that we'd magically flown over those moments, like

a migrating bird swerving upwards to avoid a forest fire. The fires have been the fire of growth – for me and for the church – and also of joy. And it has all been more than worth it.

I'd like to explain how – and to explain the connection between serving, ministry and joy.

Lord, it feels as though I've reached a point where I may have something to share. I pray for everyone who picks this little book up. Grant to them to hear your voice and sense your holy presence of magnetic love as they read. Amen.