

Past winners

Stories, words of encouragement and advice from past winners in the Upper Room writing competition

Clare O'Driscoll runner up 2020

I heard about the Upper Room competition through a circular email from a friend. I don't often do competitions and couldn't immediately think what I might write, so I filed it at the back of my brain and thought it would probably stay there.

A while later I was journaling about an experience I'd had, just for the pure joy of it, when suddenly I realised it also held a spiritual message and was almost exactly the right wordcount for the competition. I made some tweaks and sent it off... then forgot all about it. It was a really wonderful surprise, therefore, to receive an email a couple of months later saying I was a runner-up. For me it was a huge encouragement to keep writing. I have been writing all my life but it is so easy to lose confidence and wonder if anything you say is resonating with others.

Since then, I have written three series for BRF's *Bible Reflections for Older People* publication and have also ghost-written an autobiography as well as continuing with my own personal writing.

I tend to write anecdotally and then draw depths from a story rather than diving straight into a spiritual message. I think my advice would be to be genuine and to write as naturally as you can, rather than trying to sound like 'it's supposed to be'. Think and pray about your message and then write - with no expectations of immediate perfection!

Clare's successful entry

Slow swim

Matthew 9:35

And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues.

Recently a friend and I joined a wild swimming club, fulfilling a dream. The first day, we waded into the crystal clear lake, splashed in and swam. Slowly.

It's impossible to say how many people overtook us. Gliding past effortlessly in full wetsuit and goggles, they seemed not just a different kind of swimmer, but a completely different species. As they sped past, the feeling was all too familiar.

I have always felt like I'm trailing behind, being overtaken by the speedy ones; struggling to keep afloat in their after-current. Work, relationships, house-buying, parenthood... I always seem to get there last. It's a humbling experience and I deal with it better in swimming than I do in life.

In the lake, however, we enjoyed our slow pace, chatting as we swam, admiring wagtails and gasping at newly hatched ducklings. It dawned on me that this is also how I live my life when I don't rush, when I stop worrying about who is going faster than me.

I think of Jesus, wandering from town to village. I imagine there was nothing speedy or go-getting about it. He took time to see people, to listen, to help. Then I realise my slow journey through life is not such a disaster. I may not achieve as much or as quickly as some, but perhaps, in my slowness, I can relish God's beauty and presence, taking time for whatever he has in store for me.

Valerie Eker runner up 2020

My circumstances had been changing and I was wondering if I should use some of my time for writing. Very tentatively, I decided to enter the Upper Room writing competition as a kind of test case, not really expecting anything to come of it.

It was the most amazing surprise and affirmation to discover I was a runner up. To see my words in print was immensely satisfying and I have gone on to write a couple of series for *Bible reflections for older people* and a number of reflections for our church website.

I would encourage anyone who was wondering whether to enter this year's competition or not to 'have a go'. At the least it will be a good discipline to express yourself within the constraints of the competition. At the best, it might set you off along a new and exciting pathway.

Valerie's successful entry

Finishing the race

Philippians 1:6

Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

I'm ashamed to say I'm someone who often starts things with great enthusiasm but doesn't always finish them.

When a friend told me she was pregnant, I rushed out to buy some wool to crochet a cot blanket. By the time the baby was born I was about half way through. Sadly, I then allowed myself to be distracted by other interests so that the almost-but-not-quite finished blanket was still sitting at the bottom of my sewing basket when my friend's son left home and moved abroad to start a new job! My zest for new things often peters out like a damp squib. So, how was I to keep going beyond the first flush of enthusiasm when I became a Christian?

Thankfully, I have come to realise that in committing my life to Jesus, the Son of God, I have placed myself in the hands of the supreme 'completer/finisher'

Jesus, on our behalf, lived the perfect human life all the way through. At its end he could say, 'It is finished'. Now he is at work replacing our old self with his most perfect self. He is the master craftsman and we are his workmanship. He never gives up. So, now our trust is in him and not in our own stickability.