

# Candour



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NEWS AND VIEWS FOR MINISTERS

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## Christian spiritual disciplines



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## Contributions

We welcome responses to published articles. If you would like to write a piece replying to any of this month's featured articles, please contact:

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# Adaptation and evolution

Amanda Wells

**O**n the last day of November, I did some serious damage to a finger.<sup>1</sup> Not the best start to Advent nor conducive to competing in a mountain run for which I'd spent weeks training. It gave an unusual focus to what was always going to be a difficult December.

I'm not unfamiliar with injuries but this took the biscuit in terms of pain. Swearing at nurses is hardly my normal *modus operandi*, and it was interesting to (later) reflect on how pain morphs your personality. Your focus so easily narrows to selfish concern, excluding any cherished beliefs you might have about caring for others. While finger and facial injuries apparently generate the greatest levels of discomfort, you acquire new admiration for those experiencing and surviving severe trauma.

But the most interesting thing was how quickly you adapt. Holding the affected finger out of the way, being hyper-aware of things that might bump it, and typing with nine fingers quickly become unconscious behaviours. A new "normal" emerges. I started to wonder if I would be able to return to 10-finger typing...

Humans have an amazing ability to compensate. The way you work around a deficit might seem glaringly obvious to an observer yet never occur to you. We like to think that people separated from God experience a glaring lack in their lives but, for many, their "normal" works perfectly well. It's comforting to posit a "God-sized hole" but experience with my age-group peers suggests that simply doesn't resonate. To assume otherwise can create significant barriers in communicating the Gospel as the message fails to mesh with the audience. It's only if your world shifts and normal is knocked sideways that you glimpse it as a construct rather than an absolute. And this window will be fleeting, as you always seek to return to the comfort of the familiar.

Why should people believe in 20th century New Zealand? What does belief have to offer someone satisfied with career and relationships? How can we deflect the challenge of irrelevance? Or the charge of rigidity? If you can't address those questions, you're failing to engage with a significant segment of society. They already have implicit answers to those questions, and these answers will not be leading them through your door on a Sunday morning.

This is the last editorial I'll be writing for *Candour*. I'm grateful for all the experiences I've had and people I've met during the past six years. While I don't have easy answers to any of the questions I've posed, I do know that people living out their faith can make a difference. Many of you are doing an incredibly difficult job for little tangible (or even intangible) reward but continue to inspire and motivate others in their journeys. Endless soul searching about Christianity's decline achieves little in contrast to those attempting to be honest incarnations of the Jesus they follow.

I have heard and written so many inspirational stories in my time here that I know blanket generalisations about growth or decline fail to capture a complex reality. Do you define success as changing one person's life? Or do you aggregate and balance successes against failures and lost opportunities? I can struggle to explain the relevance of churchgoing without using a language fast becoming anachronistic, yet still value those Sunday mornings. Many of the things that attract us to church can be more easily and effectively found elsewhere: community, intellectual stimulation and emotional connection. But to say that it's all about Jesus is to offer an answer that our society is fast losing the ability to interpret.

A particular thank you to everyone who has contributed an article to *Candour* during this time, and to the editorial committee who suggest potential contributors month after month. *Candour* is somewhat unique among New Zealand Churches and I know that it serves an important purpose for its readers, both in terms of stimulating thought and providing a collegial connection. I know you will continue this engagement under its new editor. And I want to acknowledge my mum, Rosemary Wells, who has proofed nearly every issue of *Candour* (and many of *Spanz*) during this time, always catching mistakes that I miss, for no reward but thanks.

The March issue of *Candour* will have the theme "What is the Church called to in our world". Contributions are very welcome and can be emailed to [candour@presbyterian.org.nz](mailto:candour@presbyterian.org.nz); the deadline will be 28 February.

<sup>1</sup> For the curious: hold stick blender in right hand, use left index finger to clear the blades then simultaneously press on button. Feel free to refrain from pointing out that you should always turn it off at the wall first etc.

# Up close and personal – for all to hear

Geoff New, Papakura East Presbyterian, Northern

**A**llow me a generalisation. If you have been formally trained in preaching, or been mentored in the art and science of preaching, chances are you have been warned against committing the cardinal sin of sermon preparation. Never use your time of personal prayer for sermon preparation or vice versa! Ever!

While I understand the reasons behind such a sentiment, the more I consider this caution the more I find it curious at best and counter-productive at worse. I am sure that anyone in pastoral ministry is endeavouring to engage whole-heartedly in the mission of God and service of God's people. Why, when and how did we come to a place whereby it is deemed wisdom that the prayer of the preacher is split off from their sermon preparation? When did it become best practice that the effect of wrestling with God ought not to be submitted to the people of God through preaching?

In one of the old appendices of the Book of Order, there is a beautiful take on the life of the preacher:

*The peculiar responsibility which the ordinand now is focused in the task of the interpretation of Holy Scripture, of bringing the Christian message to contemporary expression. This is no light task, but a full-time and lifetime preoccupation. It involves understanding the Bible, attending to the history of its interpretation in the Church, and openness to the contemporary world, always in dependence on the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, so that the Gospel can be tellingly expressed there.*

I like the phrase embedded in there – “a full-time and lifetime preoccupation.” Note, not occupation but preoccupation. This is the difference between good preachers and great preachers. Great preachers are always preparing for a sermon. Preoccupied. Regardless of where they are and what they are doing. Even praying.

Over the past two years I have been writing my Doctor of Ministry thesis. My research is considering the effect of praying the Scripture at hand for any given sermon, utilising the spiritual disciplines of lectio divina and Ignatian Gospel Contemplation. Both disciplines immerse the pray-er in the context and message of the Scriptures. To this end, I engaged seven participants who were willing to supplement their sermon preparation with such prayer over a four-month period as they engaged in their preaching ministry. All seven were passionate about preaching and included one Anglican vicar, two Baptist pastors, one Methodist and three Presbyterian ministers.

During the four months of the research exercise, one particular challenge was this issue of what to do in lieu of a deep and personal encounter with God over and against the fact that a sermon now needed to be prepared and preached. The participants experienced genuine angst, at least in part, because of the engrained counsel “never use your time of personal prayer for sermon preparation” etc! We were obviously confronted with the decision as to whether particular insights gained from the prayer were appropriate for the sermon and good discretion was exercised in this regard. However, the dichotomy of personal spirituality and public ministry reared its head. It is a false dichotomy, in my view. Phillips Brooks’ oft-quoted (and for good reason) definition of preaching captures the holistic vision of preaching to be embraced:

*Truth through personality is our description of real preaching. The truth must come really through the person, not merely over his [sic] lips, not merely into his understanding and out through his pen. It must come through his character, his affections, his whole intellectual and moral being. It must come genuinely through him.<sup>1</sup>*

This is the stuff of authenticity. The whole person submitted to the whole counsel of God for sole purpose of God.

I like the Jesuits’ agenda. From their inception they spoke of being contemplativus in action. That is, contemplatives in action. They were not satisfied to simply contemplate and that’s that. It had to result in embodying and being unified with the will of God in the world.

*There is an active life which proceeds from the fullness of contemplation, such as teaching and preaching.*

<sup>1</sup> Brooks, Phillips (1965), *Phillips Brooks on Preaching* (London: SPCK): 8.



*... And this work is more excellent than simple contemplation. For even as it is better to enlighten than merely shine, so it is better to give to others the fruits of one's contemplation than merely to contemplate<sup>2</sup>*

In this regard, one writer has added a fifth element to the conventional four movements of *lectio divina* (lectio, meditation, oratio, contemplation) – *incarnatio*.<sup>3</sup> Its meaning and theological significance are self-evident.

Imagine: preachers opening the Scriptures and, in the preaching of them, garnishing it with the aftermath of so-called “personal prayer”, “personal devotions”, “quiet times”, or by whatever name you use to describe such engagement with Christ.

It takes courage to preach like that. And there is no guarantee it will even be that well received. A prophetic message often isn't. But, as fellow-preachers, I call you out. Do not back off, saying that such preaching advances an elitist caricature of the preacher. Such thinking might have more to do with Kiwi reserve and egalitarianism. It is not elitist; it is servanthood. It is laying your life down before and for your congregation. It is being up close and personal with God – and with God's people.

<sup>2</sup> Brou, Alexandre (1949), *Ignatian Methods of Prayer* (Milwaukee: Bruce): 28.

<sup>3</sup> Mulholland Jr., M. Robert (1997), ‘Prayer as Availability to God’, *Weavings*: 20-26.

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# Including contemplative prayer in ministry formation

*Diane Gilliam-Weeks, Upper Clutha Presbyterian, Southern*

**The Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership forms ministers and leaders for service in the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand and partner Churches. It is reasonable to suggest that a fully formed, servant-mission leader must first and foremost be able to connect with the living God at the deepest level of intimacy. It is the argument of this report that the formation of ministers remains unfinished without an understanding of the history and practice of contemplative prayer.**

When I began to build my case for the inclusion of contemplative prayer in ministry training, I was unaware that one of its leading contemporary exponents, Fr Thomas Keating, had made the same pitch to the Catholic Church 25 years ago. They did not listen then... but they are listening today.

In the intervening period, a global network of practitioners has developed along with an appreciation of the benefits of contemplative prayer for those in leadership – particularly as churches become increasingly risk averse.

My case is based on the following principles:

**Ministry formation would be greatly enhanced by balancing theological and practical formation with intentional interior spiritual formation.**

In ministry and servant leadership, we are entrusted with the spiritual care of others. Ministry training must therefore produce people who have themselves been spiritually formed in some systematic way. This formation cannot be assumed or left to chance. The practice of contemplative prayer would integrate a student's interiority with what they have mastered intellectually and in the field. Another exponent writes, "because the Gospel invites everyone to communion with Christ, it is essential all spiritual leaders be mentored and taught ways to enter more deeply into intimacy with Christ".<sup>1</sup>

**Ministry formation should reflect the Church's espousal of the transforming action of the Holy Spirit.**

However, it's my observation that while our ministers have a well-integrated intellectual appreciation of the faith, they may lack the disciplines for developing an ever deeper intimacy with God that transforms the whole person. They have [little or] no familiarity with what the ancient church used to call "the three Vias" [via purgativa, via illuminativa, and via unitiva].<sup>2</sup>

**The wisdom of contemplative prayer encourages humility before God.**

Faith matures by progressive surrender. Learning about the history and practice of contemplative prayer would allow students to intentionally explore this process for themselves.

**The practice of contemplative prayer allows God to reveal unconscious motivations and vestigial behaviours that frustrate spiritual maturity.**

When we are unaware of our programming, it can greatly interfere with our ability to relate to God and to others. Appendix II argues this point in depth and in a theological context.

**The practice of contemplative prayer can assist ministers to identify potential areas of weaknesses that could expose them and the Church to risk.**

"Christ-centred kenosis" or "holy silence" diminishes self-inflation and self-preoccupation and brings to light our ongoing need to repent and consent to God's transforming action in us. Brian McLaren comments: "You think of the ubiquitous clergy scandals of recent decades and you realize that whatever the strengths of the seminary, the via purgativa isn't a strong enough part of the curriculum."<sup>3</sup> Such insight would enable ministers to engage more fruitfully in high-quality clinical supervision.

## **Contemplative practice is a safe-guard against the cost of burnout to the individual and the Church.**

The bright evangelical mind — always so active and in pursuit — must leap great hurdles of spiritual and intellectual activity to shut itself down and be still. <sup>4</sup> Training in contemplative prayer offers a roadmap to the practice of silence before God. There are plenty of examples in the Presbyterian Church where ministers have had to take a long period off work and on pay in order to recover from physical, emotional and spiritual burnout.

The disciplined practice of contemplative prayer provides not only opportunity for increased intimacy with God, but daily time and space in an attitude of consent and surrender in which to rest, refocus and recharge batteries while God works on us. As part of its own risk management, the Presbyterian Church should be equipping its students with an actual method of stress management as well as an intellectual understanding.

## **Contemporary approaches to centring prayer interweave Biblical insight into the human condition with contemporary understanding of the stages of human development, psychology and advances in neurophysiology.**

An understanding of the history and practice of contemplation would help ministers to articulate the process of spiritual formation to their congregations in contemporary language that is faithful to Scripture.

Contemplative practice allows ministers to model for their congregations the healthy balance required to sustain ongoing active service to God.

The 21st century is a time of extreme social anxiety. This pressure to perform can be transmitted through social groups and a congregation is no exception. High levels of anxious energy can interfere with a faith community's ability to function in a "healthy" manner. In *Centring Prayer and the Work of the Clergy*, David Lawson maintains that ministers can actually function as an "immune system for their congregations, transforming the negative energy of anxiety into creative energy available to empower new ministry and growth". <sup>5</sup>

Instead of a withdrawal from the world, contemplative prayer refreshes us for encounter with the world. Thomas Merton observed the ancients knew that "there are times when activity must supplant contemplation. Both are in fact demanded by charity, since we are commended to love both God and our neighbour... the only solution to the conflict between those two claims on our hearts is to achieve the balance required by our own individual vocation with the church of God. The pastor of souls must not neglect the necessary element of prayer and meditation in his [sic] life."<sup>6</sup>

It is the view of the Director of the National Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, Professor Kevin Clements, that without personal internal transformation, efforts to transform the world are fruitless.<sup>7</sup> The role of contemplation in human transformation has "three fundamental manifestations: listening to God, experiencing and being formed by God's presence, and manifesting the presence of God in us through our desires, words, and actions".<sup>8</sup>

## **Unless ministers in the Church are equipped in contemplative prayer, people who are spiritually seeking will continue to look to other religious traditions for the spiritual experience they are not finding in their own churches.**

Without exposure to the Church's contemplative history, ministers could serve a life time without understanding that what many people seek is a valuable part of the Christian tradition. While it's true that university courses in church history mention the desert mothers and fathers, there is no attempt to outline at undergraduate level what these Amma and Abbas were actually doing to get closer to God.

## **The practice of contemplative prayer is modelled in Jesus' own ministry.**

A curriculum for ministry formation that includes the history and practice of contemplative prayer would be anchored firmly in Christ.

## **The benefits of contemplative prayer are recognised across the theological spectrum**

In his book *Strengthen yourself in the Lord*, one of the most influential writers from the Pentecostal tradition encourages the practice of contemplative prayer. Calling it “leaning into God”, Bill Johnson describes a posture of listening by “dialling down the voice of our own thoughts and waiting to hear [God]”.<sup>9</sup>

At the other end of the Christian spectrum is hermit priest, writer, and internationally known retreat leader Cynthia Bourgeault. She has worked closely with Fr Thomas Keating, an adjunct faculty member at the Vancouver School of Theology. Her book *Contemplative Prayer and Inner Awakening* 10 has attracted a lot of attention among contemplatives in New Zealand. In the past few years, at the invitation of Christchurch-based Adult Education Trust, she has twice visited here to conduct workshops and seminars on Centring Prayer at St Andrew’s on the Terrace in Wellington, and in Auckland and Christchurch.

## **The Church is already grounded in the contemplative movement through Spiritual Growth Ministries**

For many years, Spiritual Growth Ministries has nurtured the Christian contemplative tradition in New Zealand by providing spiritual direction, formation of spiritual directors, retreats and other experiences of prayer. Their *Journal of Contemplative Spirituality, Refresh*, has sought to stimulate thought, prayer and discipleship for over a decade.<sup>11</sup> While sprouting largely from Presbyterian soil, today SGM connects people from diverse Christian traditions and experience “who find depth and meaning through the whole Christian heritage of contemplative spirituality”.<sup>12</sup>

## **As well as benefitting the individual, the fruits of contemplative prayer can be seen in the congregations and communities of those who practise its forms.**

Many practitioners of contemplative prayer, including myself, would be happy to offer training and retreats for ministry students and for those already in ministry when the need for further spiritual formation or refreshment is identified during the Ministry Development Review process.

There are excellent written and video resources for workshops and seminars that can be used to teach the history, practice and benefits of contemplative prayer in dialogue with contemporary science.

My 2009 study leave report invited the principal and staff of the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership to seriously consider including a module on the history and practice of contemplative prayer in its curriculum. I was grateful for their consideration of my ideas.

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- 12 <http://www.sgm.org.nz>



# Gifts from the monastery: The sabbath and fasting

Lynne Baab, Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership, Dunedin\*

**A**lmost every year for 10 years I stayed for a few days at a Benedictine monastery for women. During an early visit, one of the sisters told me how special Sundays are at the monastery, and over the years I observed many signs of festivity on Sundays. The sisters wore dressier clothes, the food was even more abundant and delicious, and they decorated their beautiful chapel with flowers, textiles, and candles in colours that reflected the church year. I learned that the sisters slept later on Sundays, and I noticed a joyful and relaxed air that permeated the community.

At the time of my first visit to the monastery, I had been observing a sabbath with great enthusiasm for more than 15 years. At that point in my life, the sabbath for me was mostly about ceasing from certain things, such as work and multitasking. I had observed the sabbath as a stay-at-home mom and part-time student, and then later as a freelance writer and editor. On Sundays I took care of my kids without doing housework. I didn't study or turn on my computer on Sundays. My husband and I didn't do home repairs or shop for groceries.

The Benedictine sisters added a new perspective for me; sabbath as the presence of abundance and celebration. Later, when I interviewed sabbath observers for my book on the sabbath, I heard stories that represented both aspects of this day of rest: ceasing and celebrating. People talked about a wide variety of kinds of work that they stopped on their day of rest, such as errands, laundry, and pulling weeds, as well as paid work. They talked about keeping the day free from anxiety, arguments with family members, dealing with money, and thinking about items on a to-do list.

Sabbath keepers also talked about practices that made the day feel celebratory: taking the time to cook hot cereal for breakfast, having relaxed meals or walks with friends after church, staying in church clothes all day, journaling, and praying thankfulness prayers with their families. These patterns, described by different people, gave me a sense of the wide variety of options for the ways the sabbath day can be set apart from the other days of the week. They helped me understand that the sabbath is about stopping some things, which makes space for rest, celebration, and joy.

The sabbath is a discipline that affirms the significance of rhythms. Abraham Heschel, in his beautiful book *The Sabbath*, affirms: "Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul." Heschel goes on to describe the underlying reality that this rhythm represents: "The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else."<sup>1</sup>

Fasting is another spiritual discipline that affirms the significance of rhythms, another discipline that has strong roots in monastic tradition. In this article I will compare and contrast sabbath keeping and fasting because their similarities and differences have so much to teach us about being faithful to God in our time.

## The return of holy rhythms

Both fasting and sabbath keeping are enjoying a renaissance in Christian circles in Western countries, after being neglected for many years. Those of us older than 40 or 50 can remember when Sundays were more restful, with stores, restaurants and opportunities for recreation severely curtailed. The decline in observance of a day of rest happened rapidly in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In somewhat the same way, fasting was a significant spiritual discipline for most of Christian history, yet it fell out of favor in the late 1800s and stayed out of favor until recently. Richard Foster, in his book *Celebration of Discipline*, points out that he couldn't find a single book on the topic of Christian fasting published between 1861 and 1954, a period of almost 100 years. He asks, "What would account for this almost total disregard of a subject so frequently mentioned in Scripture and so ardently practiced by Christians throughout the centuries?"<sup>2</sup>

Foster and other writers on fasting believe that it fell out of favour in part because of excesses in the medieval period, when fasting came to be associated with self-punishment. Experts on the

<sup>1</sup> Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1951), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 47.

sabbath believe that we abandoned the sabbath in part because of the excesses of the Puritans, who turned the day of rest into a day of joyless rules and regulations, and whose influence was felt in the United States well into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both disciplines, which started out as gifts, came to be infused with rigidity and self-righteousness.

Forces at work in our culture have contributed to the increased attention sabbath keeping and fasting are receiving in our time. Our culture is spinning faster and faster, almost out of control in both busyness and consumption. We are increasingly aware that this pattern cannot possibly be what God intends for us. The sabbath affirms God's invitation to rest from ceaseless, frenzied activity, while fasting affirms God's invitation to rest from constant, mind-numbing consumption.

Both disciplines affirm that God intends us to embrace holy rhythms. Our culture has lost almost all sense of rhythm. Electric light makes day and night irrelevant. The shipping of food all over the globe makes seasons less significant, and the abundance of food gives us no connection with cycles of plenty and want. We have too much to do and too much to consume all around us all the time, and this new form of excess is wearing us out. The sabbath and fasting give us an opportunity to catch our breath and experience the freedom of stopping.

The sabbath and fasting, by definition, last for a finite period of time. The sabbath is usually one whole day each week, although some people observe shorter sabbath times. The key is the regularity of following a pattern each week. Fasting involves denying oneself something for a set period of time, such as a few hours, a day, a week, or 40 days. When we give up something month after month, we are not fasting; instead we have embraced a lifestyle or habit. The benefit of both these disciplines lies in their difference from our normal habits and patterns. They create time that is set apart or holy.

People who practice sabbath keeping and fasting talk about these disciplines as a way to clear away the clutter of everyday life and make space for things that are more important: reflection, relationships, God's values and God's priorities. Both of these disciplines enable people to listen to God more closely. People who fast and pray say that fasting helps them hear God's direction in how to pray. People who observe the sabbath say that the day of rest helps them discern God's priorities for the other six days, and as a result they work with more purpose and direction.

Both disciplines make space for prayer. In Jewish tradition, prayers of intercession are forbidden on the sabbath, but prayers of thankfulness are encouraged. By stopping and clearing away responsibilities and by choosing ways to celebrate, the sabbath makes space for thankfulness and gives us the time to notice the blessings that surround us all the time. By stopping consumption of food or other forms of pleasure and recreation, fasting makes space both for thankfulness and intercession. For many people who fast, the desire to eat or partake of the denied pleasure functions as a reminder to pray. One woman who fasts says, "Fasting is like tying a ribbon around your finger to remember God."<sup>3</sup>

### Some contrasts

The sabbath and fasting are similar in their embrace of rhythms that help us return to God as the centre of our lives. The sabbath and fasting are also distinct, reflecting profoundly different aspects of life on this beautiful and broken earth.

The two sabbath commands encourage us to remember the awesome and wonderful acts of God in creation and redemption (Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15). The sabbath is a celebration of God's abundance and goodness to us, a day to rejoice and thank our Creator and Redeemer. In fasting, on the other hand, we embrace brokenness, sadness, and human need. The fasting stories in the Bible, numbering about two dozen, are associated with mourning, repentance, and the kind of desperate need that manifests itself in heartfelt and urgent prayer. Some people today fast when their prayer needs are so intense that they don't know what else to do. Augustine wrote that fasting gives wings to our prayers,<sup>4</sup> and people who fast talk about the power they experience in their prayers when they fast.

The sabbath is a day to relish the great truth that God created the world with care, creativity, and abundance. In fasting we voluntarily restrain ourselves because the world is also broken and hurting. One of the sisters at the monastery explained that most Benedictine communities observe

<sup>3</sup> Lynne M. Baab, *Fasting: Spiritual Freedom Beyond our Appetites* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Ryan, *The Sacred Art of Fasting* (Woodstock, Vermont: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2005), p. 47.

one day each week, often Friday, without meat. She said that their motivation is eco-spirituality – eating low on the food chain – in order to tread more lightly on our damaged earth.

She reported that the most common other forms of fasting that are practiced in her community involve relationships. People choose particular times to make an effort to fast from sharp speech and other habits that damage relationships. “Each of us has our own fatal flaw that we address by fasting,” she said. The community emphasises fasting from one thing in order to feast on something else, such as fasting from rude displays of anger in order to feast on the gentleness of conversations and the joy of community life. This form of fasting acknowledges that the world is not broken simply with respect to the ecological environment. The human relational environment is also broken.

Human bodies bear the marks of brokenness as well. A friend of mine developed an auto-immune disorder while pregnant, and the death of the baby seemed certain and imminent. She asked an elder in her church to come and pray for her, specifically that she would be able to bear the loss of the baby. The elder fasted before she came to pray, and felt led by God to pray for total healing of mother and baby. God completely healed my friend’s body of the auto-immune disorder, and that baby is now a robust four year old with a younger brother. The elder who fasted and prayed was willing to enter into the brokenness of my friend’s medical situation, listen for God’s guidance, and pray with passion and conviction for God’s restoration.

So often we Christians in wealthy countries want life to be smooth, positive, and upbeat. We deserve it, we find ourselves thinking. And something might be wrong with us if we can’t generate those positive feelings. Fasting encourages us to enter into a place where we acknowledge our utter dependence on God to bring light into the all-too-frequent darkness of life on this earth. In fasting, we acknowledge human sin and failings, and we look to God for solutions.

Given our desire for an upbeat way of looking at life, it might seem likely that Christians in wealthy countries would embrace the sabbath more readily than fasting. However, the sabbath requires another kind of humility that we generally find difficult. When we observe the sabbath, we admit that God can run the universe quite competently without our help for a day. We acknowledge that we are God’s creatures and God’s children, utterly dependent on Someone Else for every breath we take, every bite we eat, and every achievement that we accomplish. This requires us to relinquish pride and self-satisfaction, something that does not come easily.

The sabbath and fasting call us into uncomfortable places. They do it in different ways, but they have in common a call to turn away from our own competence, achievements, desires, and needs. Both involve an invitation to turn toward God for something we cannot find within ourselves or in our broken world. For most of us, we need the help of others to act on this invitation.

## Gifts from the monastery

My yearly visits to the monastery made me think hard about the nature of Christian community and my desires for it. In our individualistic culture, we so easily think of spiritual disciplines as something we do on our own, finding a quiet place alone for things like daily devotional times or centring prayer. Both fasting and sabbath keeping, as they are practiced by Christians in our time, encourage us to think about the ways spiritual disciplines can be embedded in community life.

The community that keeps the sabbath together is often a nuclear or extended family. My husband and I experienced communal sabbath keeping when our children were young. Once, when it had been raining for weeks on end, my husband decided to mow the law on a sunny Sunday, something he would not normally have done. We loved that our children were appalled at this choice. “We don’t mow lawns on Sunday, Daddy!”

Single people and married people without children can also enjoy a communal sabbath. At a church where I used to serve, a group of people in their twenties and early thirties observed the sabbath together on Sunday afternoons, spending time in relaxed conversation, cooking together, simply hanging out. They embraced the luxury of unscheduled time, something they did not allow themselves on other days.

When I was writing my book on fasting, I interviewed dozens of Christians who fast, and I was amazed at the number who fast in community. Married couples, small groups, even whole congregations fast together. One woman told me about a round robin fast she organised when her

sister was very ill. Family members signed up to fast and pray on specific days, so that on any given day, someone was fasting and praying for the healing of their beloved family member.

Communal fasting has many blessings. The group of people who are fasting can agree on the prayer requests they will focus on. They can check in with each other to provide support to each other. Since fasting often involves hearing God's voice in unexpected ways, they can talk over what they are hearing from God and get feedback.

Communal fasting can be practiced with individual freedom regarding the form of the fast. A congregation in South America has weekly fast days and a yearly week-long fast. People are encouraged to fast in whatever ways they are able: some people will fast from all food and drink water, people with strenuous jobs will eat a lighter diet than normal, and children are encouraged to give up a favourite food or favourite form of entertainment. In the United States, with the prevalence of eating disorders, communal fasting must be practiced with this kind of freedom. People with a history of eating disorders should never fast from food in any form, but can join into a communal fast by ceasing from shopping, TV, computer use, or some other common pastime or pleasure, using the time that is freed up to pray and read the Bible.

Another gift from monasteries is engagement in prayer that is concerned both with justice in the world and with the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In many church settings, a dichotomy between these two Biblical priorities has created divisions and polarisation. Fasting is a discipline that bridges these two concerns. Many people report that when they fast, giving up either food or other pleasures, they experience sympathy for people who live with much less. Their prayers for the poor – those who are poor in material things and those who are poor in spiritual riches – are ignited by fasting.

Both sabbath keeping and fasting bring freedom to step aside from cultural values and daily preoccupations, for a set time, and enter into God's values in a new way. For many people, this freedom doesn't come easily at first. Support from others in starting a new practice can be very helpful, even essential.

Followers of Jesus who practice sabbath keeping and fasting report that they are freed to hear to God's voice in new ways, to rest in God's goodness and God's gifts in new ways, and to live more consistently with God's priorities. These spiritual disciplines are gifts of the freedom that comes through Jesus Christ.

*\*Rev Dr Lynne M Baab (www.lynnabaab.com) is the Jack Somerville Lecturer in Pastoral Theology at the University of Otago and adjunct tutor at the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership. She is the author of numerous books, including Sabbath Keeping and Fasting. In May, her next book will be published, Friending: Real Relationships in a Virtual World. This article was originally published in Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation. Fall/Winter 2007, vol 5.2. See conversationsjournal.com for more.*

## WAKATIPU COMMUNITY PARISH [PRESBYTERIAN]

The Wakatipu Parish-Queenstown, Frankton and Arrowtown congregations- is seeking a National Ordained Minister, to lead a team of staff and volunteers, with a vision to serve the community, and build worshipping congregations. The leader will help us see and grasp opportunities for outreach in the growing Wakatipu community. A gifted encourager, mentor and people person, will assist us in our vision.

Expressions of interest should be sent to the Convenor of the Ministry Settlement Board:

Rev Stephanie Wells, 30 Dungannon Street, Ranfurly. Phone 03 444 9340  
email:stephaniewells@clear.net.nz.

# Making time for discipline

Marg Schrader, Minister Emeritus, Wellington

*God is nothing but love.  
Dare to give all for love  
Give all yourselves without fear.  
- A Taize chant.*

**“You don’t have to earn your own salvation you know, Marg,” said my spiritual director, a Catholic sister, to me, a newly ordained Presbyterian minister. If you are going to be a minister of the Gospel you will need to learn to say “NO” to many of the things you are asked to do, so you can say a big “yes” to God’s love and do your ministry out of that love. To somehow discover that rhythm that Jesus had of the inward life of prayer, out of which his deep ministry came.**

She went on to say, “I have seen too many clergy who are so busy with the expectations of the parish and the community that they are unable to take time to really listen to God, let alone spend real time with family, so their ministry loses its focus. And dare I say, its soul?”

She then asked, “what do you sense your priorities are?”

I cannot remember what my answer was then 30 years ago but today I would probably say something like: “I think the most important thing about ministry is the inner journey; that journey into that quiet place within, where I let go of all my agendas and my fears and my pretences and say my “yes” to God again and again. In other words, to be transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ, or, to use other words, to become the person God has made me; or to let the Spirit flow freely through me, and then from that deep place listen again to the call on my life for the outer journey, the tasks of ministry for today and the future. All of that so I can do that outer journey into the life of our world wherever God is calling.”

I find that a real challenge. Finding silence in a culture where busyness is a god, taking really reflective time to let the Scriptures speak deeply to my life and be formed by them, being still enough to let all those things I have pushed down because of busyness or because they are too painful come to the surface and into the light of God. That for me takes time and discipline because for me, as for many of us, it does not come naturally.

I used to be surprised at the number of clergy who got headaches or stomach aches not many days into their holiday, when they had nothing to keep them occupied. Today I recognise it as a fear of what might be present within, which needs to come to the surface and be looked at and healed.

Jesus’ temptations speak deeply into that: his struggling with power, popularity, and prestige. When he said his loud “no” to all that, he was able to go out and minister from that amazingly free place, where his own stuff did not get in the way. For each of us it may be different, but I have seen all three very clearly in the clergy I work with and within myself. That deep, almost terrifying fear: “what if I am not in control... if I don’t have the power”.

For others, “if I do that [or don’t do that] they won’t like me, they will think I am not a good minister”. Usually unspoken, “I need to be popular”.

And for others, “I need to show people I am the best”.

You know your temptations, which get in the way of you being freely you and able to respond to the call of God to do or not to do.

All of this takes time and that is not easy to come by unless we make our journey into God a priority. Time each day, as we pray and listen to God speak to us through the Scripture for our life, not just for the next sermon or study group.

Take Sabbath.... whatever that means... as time to let all those things you have pushed down because they get in the way to surface.... to struggle with all those false gods, to hear the new thing that God is calling you to.

How come it is the only commandment we don’t make an effort with? Not many of us would think twice about killing or stealing or even lusting after our neighbour’s ox, yet there is something in



our culture that says we don't need to take time out. Invite the Spirit in to break down the barriers, the defences...

I sometimes invite my directees to walk the beach with me and to ask them to not speak but to be aware of all their senses. To slow down by being very present to God through the wind, the sun the smell of the surf, the feel of the salt spray on their skin, the beauty of the clouds.

I would then ask them what they had noticed and how they feel. "How is God present for you in this?"

Later, if their busy schedule allows: "allow something on this beach, or street or garden to speak to you". The last time I did it, it was a used cigarette butt and finally the tears came.... "That's just how I feel used and discarded, of no use." What a wonderful place to start proper spiritual direction with the truth about what life is like at the moment. It is the truth, naming the truth, that sets us free.

What is it that helps you be really still, slow down, let your own thoughts die down for a while and sink into that love? For each of us it is different. May be music, or walking or running or wandering around the garden, it may be following your breath or noticing your body. My knowing is that it is one of the most difficult things to do to let go of my agenda and be really present to God and God's agenda.

It is then that we can hear the still small voice reminding us that we are loved, or that we need not be afraid, or suggesting that we contact someone or act justly or show mercy in a particular situation.

Reading scripture and being transformed by it has many traps for those of us who preach. How easy it is to read the passage thinking all the time. "How will I preach this? Or Mrs Bloggs needs to hear this, or Matthew says this but Mark says that..." All of which are good but the real issue for us is "God, what are you saying to me? How do you want me to be open to this truth and then what do you want me to say to your people?"

How often I have heard busy church workers say "Scripture is boring, it no longer speaks to me". So the question is "what does feed you at present; what brings you closer to God?" There are many books by today's Gospel writers that speak deeply to us. For me at present they are Barbara Brown Taylor, Henri Nouwen and Cynthia Bourgeault. Who are they for you?

It may also be music or getting away and walking the beach or climbing the hill or doing 50 laps in the pool, turning a piece of wood or digging the garden. You know in that deep place what you need in order to be open. I always knew that something deep was happening for my husband Warren when the strains of Verdi's Requiem would fill the house.

As I listen to people it is often clear what they need. For one, it is time to play! Yes play, not only pray! For another, the discipline of turning off the computer or the TV for long periods, for another the discipline of not eating or drinking too much, for another spending quality time regularly with family or friends.

For me as I work with L'Arche [the community of people with and without intellectual disabilities], it is opening myself to learn from them, discovering that they are my teachers.

Seems to me that Jesus was pretty strong about taking time to be with people who are different from us, those on the edge of society, those we would not normally associate with. These people often lead us in to the dark places within ourselves when we feel out of control or unnerved, those places that need to be healed.

As Christians we know only too well the truth of the paschal mystery that out of death comes life, that there are treasures in the darkness.

Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche, writes something that I find myself pondering time and time again:

*Just as some of the purest and most cleansing substances  
come from things that are rotten-  
wine and alcohol from fermented fruit, penicillin from mould.  
And just as the earth is nourished by animal manure,*

*so our hearts and inner brokenness are healed through communion  
with all that we have rejected and are afraid of;  
the poor and weak, enemies and strangers.*  
- Jean Vanier "Our Journey Home"

This takes time and prayer and good spiritual direction as we come to terms with those things in our lives that trip us up, or stop us from being truly free and able to minister out of that compassionate clear place where we recognise that all are our sisters and brothers.

And when things go to custard, when the phone rings before you are really awake and another emergency is added to an already full day, to sink as you remind yourself that *"the voice of love is heard in every storm"* [Nan Merrill Psalm 29] and ask to be in touch with that amazing voice. Then at night as you fall exhausted into bed, to briefly look back at the day to see where you have been aware of the activity of God!

Finally, our earth is calling out to us to recognise what the mystics of all faiths have always said and the scientists are now confirming: that we are all connected with each other and with our earth; that our actions and even our thoughts affect all of life. Perhaps right up front, we need to be asking, "in what way can I care more for the earth and in what way can I be more aware of that deep connectedness I have to all of God's creation?"

What a privilege and responsibility as we live with the knowledge that

*"into our hands, into our hearts,  
does the beloved surrender,  
that we might do with Love  
what we will".*  
- Ps33 Merrill.

## Some favourite books and resources

[www.pray-as-you-go.org](http://www.pray-as-you-go.org). A good web site that takes the gospel of the day and provides music and questions to help you delve deep in to the passage (in audio file format and available via iTunes as a podcast). Also an excellent way of looking back over your day to notice where you have seen God and how you have responded, and a way of stilling our busy mind with body and breath prayer.

My favourite authors at present:

- Cynthia Bourgeault especially "Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening" and many others.
- Barbara Brown Taylor. "An Altar In the World and many others."
- Henri Nouwen. "Coming Home" and many others.
- Nan Merrill. "Psalms For Praying" [a 20th century woman dialoguing with the psalmist]
- David Toonan. "Praying in a Post -Einsteinian World." a useful article for those with a scientific mind.

## Minister – Full Time

St Andrew's Community Presbyterian Church is located in the multi-cultural South Auckland mission field of Otahuhu.

We are praying for a minister who is committed to working across and amongst cultural groups, has a strong biblical ministry, encourages growth in children and youth and who is willing to participate fully in the life of our church family.

For more information and Parish Profile, please contact:  
Rev Kevin Finlay (Nominator)  
(09) 535 4403  
[kevin@howpres.org.nz](mailto:kevin@howpres.org.nz)

# Running the race

*Silvia Purdie, Foxton/Shannon Co-operating, Manawatu Wanganui*

**Who needs something else to feel guilty about? “I should get more exercise. I should lose some weight. I should be fitter.” These stay at the level of “oughts” and guilt unless we are fully persuaded that these things are priorities, even essential, for a life of ministry. Does physical fitness matter?**

Ministry doesn’t exactly help us to stay fit and healthy; the endless supply of sausage rolls and muffins, the hours in the car, sitting at meeting after meeting, and work at the computer threaten to make us a little heavier and slower each year. Yet more and more is expected of us: emotionally, spiritually, strategically, politically, and in terms of trouble-shooting. The last thing we want in our rare moments of time off is more effort but getting out and working out is exactly what we need. I want to make a case for physical exercise as a spiritual and ministry discipline, for our own good, for our churches, and for Christ.

We often find in the epistles “running the race” as a metaphor for the Christian life and ministry. Hebrews 12:1: “Therefore... let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...” Jesus runs up ahead, having opened the way. The Spirit gives strength and power. Paul writes like a personal trainer, encouraging the Galatians that “you were running well” (5:7) but had lost the track, got bogged down with stuff that didn’t matter. (Personally, I’ve never run in a race since those dreadful days at school of chugging in next-to-last, lungs screaming. But I am planning to do a small triathlon this year with my boys. I’m told they’re quite friendly and encouraging.)

My question today is how actual physical running relates to the metaphor. My claim is that developing the ability to run (or swim, or walk up hills) does strengthen our ability to “run with perseverance” that spiritual race of faithfully speaking God’s word, caring for and leading God’s people and staying attuned to the Spirit. I’d like to pick up three ways in which being physically fit helps our spiritual and ministry fitness.

## Stamina

Becoming physically fit has vastly improved my capacity for work. Our new ministry review process talks about “mission capacity”, and one of the key ways to grow our ability to work hard and effectively over a long haul is being strong in body and mind and spirit. My yoga teacher talks about being “strong and steady under pressure”, which is exactly what we need in ministry also.

## Wellbeing

Exercise makes you feel better. Yes, really, it does. It’s a paradox that getting physically tired through exercise helps lift spiritual and emotional fatigue. The Mental Health Association has picked up five key aspects to feeling good and functioning well, which is a nice packaging of loads of solid research. Connect (relationships), Be Active (regular exercise), Take Notice, Learn, and Give (from [www.mentalhealth.org.nz](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz), “winning ways to wellbeing”). We’re pretty strong in the church on building community, spirituality and service. But physical activity? It’s one of the basic building blocks of health, and we need as ministers to be modelling that. It matters for our kids and for our parishioners. Yes, let’s pray for healing for sickness, but let’s also play our part in preventing sickness.

## Self-control

Doing exercise regularly involves pushing ourselves at times; pushing through the lethargy or discomfort. And this makes physical fitness a support and a sister to spiritual discipline. This is what Paul is talking about in 1 Cor 9: 24-27: bringing our own minds and bodies under authority, putting them to use for Christ’s purposes.

This involves dealing with pain. Yoga is great at teaching differences in pain: some pain means “stop that right now!”, while other pain means “there’s something I’m not doing right”, while still other pain actually means “great, now we’re really getting somewhere!” We’d better be able to tell the difference between these in our ministry roles also!

A commitment to our own fitness involves confronting our own limitations and attitudes. There's the voice in my head that says, "you haven't got time for this. Don't be selfish". Then there's the "ouch, this hurts so I have to stop". Do we really believe that our own health matters to God? What do we have to set in place in order to make time for our own health? What barriers do we need to push through in order to persist with something when we can't be bothered?

So I encourage you to make more time this year for your own wellbeing, including your physical fitness. If you don't look after yourself, who will?

*Heke tipu oranga, he taonga tuku iho, ka pakanga ake, aue te aiotanga, te manawanui.*

Persist in the battle and journey for wellbeing, it is a treasure handed down from heaven, then comes confidence and peace.

### **This from my husband, the Rev Chris Purdie, Army Padre, Linton Camp:**

I'm a kinaesthetic kind of guy; I find it hard to engage with God in a cerebral all-by-myself in the quiet. Running outside, especially early in the morning, opens me to the "awe"-ness of God and gives me a bigger view of things. It places me into my environment. If you go from home to care to work you don't see much. I get a sense of how big everything is. God reminds me how small my own little world is, takes me out of myself, and diminishes my self-importance. It grounds me.

Physical exercise clears the head. In my chaplaincy work I end up with a whole lot of people, pastoral issues, formal events and silly practicalities all crowding for attention in my head. Going to the gym has a transformative effect; it helps me shift stuff in my brain and pushes away the fog.

## Spiritual direction

*Andrew Dunn, Minister Emeritus, Northern\**

**T**here are a number of aspects of spiritual direction as a pastoral tool that makes it ideal for helping growth in the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life.

**Listening:** There is a shortage of listening in life today, whether between spouses, parents and children or in life in general, and not least in the church. "Attention. Deep listening. People are dying in spirit for lack of it. ...if someone truly listens to me, my spirit begins to expand" (Mary Rose O'Reilley. Weavings IX/3 22). Where can you get up to an hour of undivided attention on a regular basis in an atmosphere of trust and encouragement where the focus is on your own stuff, what God is up to in your life and how you are going in prayer, devotion, battling the demons of the day and finding your way forward? Spiritual direction provides that quality of listening.

**Confidentiality:** To have an open relationship with another spiritually focussed person where absolutely nothing that is discussed is divulged to anyone, apart from personal safety issues, is gift indeed. That leads to the most honest reflection upon how things are rather than how they should be or might be. Honesty is an important base for growth.

**Companioning:** Often the work we do as leaders within churches and Christian organisations is very isolating and lonely. To find someone who is empathetic and understanding and able to companion us in this peculiar lifestyle is life giving and has an impact on the quality of our faith journey and work with others that is significant indeed.

**Soul friending:** Someone who gets to know us deeply and is able to act as the presence of Christ to us with all his sharpness and grace is very special indeed. It helps to prise us out of our settledness and ease (that is, the ruts we so readily get into) on the one hand, and our lethargy on the other.

**Trust:** Someone to trust; somewhere where we can bare our souls, spill our guts out, vent our anger and frustrations, confess our sins and be handled with all the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit – that is a very special person and place. No wonder it is often described as holy listening, and a sacred place.

**Accountability and challenge:** To be accountable to someone on a regular basis, often month-

ly, is a good rhythm, an aid to keeping up our devotions and prayer that encourages our discoveries in the spiritual life. To meet with a person who is able to offer appropriate challenge and to ask suitable working questions is important to our growth as disciples of Jesus, as lovers of God, as imbibers of the Spirit. To have someone who can ask the deeper questions of us that set us thinking and working on the discoveries is invaluable. Often, they can be the simplest of questions! "What is God like for you now?" "How satisfied is Jesus with your relationship?" "Does God like you?" "What signs of grace have you seen this month?"

**Encouragement:** A spiritual director can be a great encourager as someone who hears and understands. This can be both when we are in a positive and bright landscape, and when the way ahead is unclear, when something is excruciatingly painful, when courage is required, when darkness has descended upon one's soul and the familiar territory is replaced by the unfamiliar and unknown.

**Focusing:** A regular spiritual direction conversation can keep the focus on God and our relationship with this One who is constantly inviting of a deepening experience and communion. "God is Communion" (Zizioulas) is no slight statement. To have someone who keeps the focus there rather than on our work and the production of whatever is important for keeping us nourished and inspired and away from the slippery slopes of burnout and disillusionment.

**Resourcing:** Most spiritual directors are very well resourced themselves and keep up a regular intake of books, articles, courses, tapes of speakers, DVDs, visiting speakers, retreats and their own growth in Christ. Hence they are invaluable in assisting with resources for the journey. Most have a kit of books for lending and are aware of libraries that hold important books on many pertinent subjects.

**Metaphors and images of spiritual direction:** Spiritual direction has been described as the "help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God's personal communication, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of this relationship" (W Barry & W Connolly. *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*. Seabury. 1983. pp 7-8).

While there are numerous definitions of it current today, here are some images and metaphors that help to clarify this art form and its value:

Soul friend – *anamchara*. This Celtic term is a beautiful and gentle image of this delicate work in the spiritual life.

Holy listening suggests the sacredness of this work and the profundity of the depth of listening it offers. We can indeed "listen a person into life" (D Steere. *Weavings* IX/3 25).

A friend on the road who says, "Look there, look here – what do you see?"

The current notion of a personal coach or trainer who encourages and offers wisdom and guidance on the way ahead and helps to set some goals.

"Physicians of the soul" is the Puritans' term for this work from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It suggests being well formed in the ways of the spiritual life (as a doctor is in medicine) and of the inner workings of the soul, the whole person growing in God and godliness.

A spiritual companion who is able to break the bread of life together with us – *com* = with, *panis* = bread.

A spiritual midwife who helps to bring to birth in us the discoveries the Lord wants us to find. See St Paul's comment re suffering birth pangs "till Christ be formed in you" (Galatians 4:19). This birthing image suggests the skills of waiting, timing and gentle ushering into life of whatever it is that is growing in us.

The Unbuilder. There is a marvellous image of spiritual direction in the *Parable of the Carpenter and the Unbuilder* (by David Griebner) where the carpenter who is invited to a meal with the king is waylaid en route with building more and more secure and safe houses to stay in on the journey. The king sends an "unbuilder" to find him and help him to let go the increasingly safe places he has made to protect himself. That image describes well an aspect of the task of the spiritual director. Someone like that for us is invaluable as they always point on to grace and the graciousness of God. (Available in *Refresh* Vol. 4, No. 2. pp 32-34 – on the SGM website listed below.)



One writer on spiritual direction, when I bought his book at a lecture in Auckland a few years ago, inscribed it thus: "To Andrew for the hatching of the heart!" That's a beauty, too, and gets to the nub of this activity – for the hatching of the heart!

## Spiritual disciplines

"... properly understood and practised, the spiritual disciplines are God-given means of grace, effective in the formation and training of Christian disciples." (Holder. *Dict. of Christian Spirituality*. SCM Press. 2005. 251).

As I have been suggesting, spiritual direction can play an invaluable role in this "formation and training" in the disciplines. Moreover, as well as the main spiritual disciplines themselves (and various writers have varied lists of them), there are closely related areas of our growth that often underpin our growth in discipleship. They are enhanced in regular retreats and spiritual direction

When a person begins to develop a sense of presence and needs assurance and guidance in how to access this more, and to grow in the experiences of God's presence and how to respond and stay in the presence.

A sense of mystery that tends to develop more in the later years on the journey of faith. Here is an invitation for a significant step forward as the earlier watertight definitions and understandings are challenged with more expansive insights into the hugeness of God's love and grace, and the complexity of life and death, creation and the universe, and however else it presents itself. A fresh embrace of the quality of mystery becomes an important and growing edge in our lives and discipleship and understandings of God.

How one contemplates and what their "contemplative profile" is like. That is, what aids this deeper openness to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and what limits, shortens or challenges that deepening. To know oneself and this gift of God opens fresh fields of nourishment and delight.

The adjustments and simplifying of the middle years and how to accept and embrace them, how to expand into the widening horizons and the often challenging growth of increasing darkness on the way and to recognise "the treasures of darkness" (Isaiah 45:3) as we are drawn ever more deeply into the simplifying process of God claiming our all.

How to better work with one's own propensity for self deception and the temptations and sins that embed themselves in our lives.

Dealing with "disordered attachments" as Ignatius of Loyola called them – anything that gets a hold on us and our hearts and minds, limiting our openness to, and freedom for, Jesus as Lord of everything in life. These include anything we build to protect ourselves from the Lord's searching love and demanding presence. They can include the positive things of busyness, work and planning as much as the negative stuff of drifting thoughts, sexual distortions, love of security, moral or ethical risk taking.

## A spiritual direction model for ministry:

There is a developing interest today in adopting a spiritual direction way of doing the basics in ministry: preaching with the disciplines in mind; giving time in services for folk to reflect on the question, "Today I hear God say to me ..."; leading small groups as group spiritual direction; pastoral visiting as times for working with folk on their discoveries and growth points, failures and learnings. One older woman asked me to teach her how to journal and as she practiced this discipline we discussed the results on each visit.

There is an excellent book on spiritual direction with a chapter that looks a pastoral work in this way, Sue Pickering's book *Spiritual Direction – A Practical Introduction*. Canterbury Press, Norwich 2008. Sue (from New Plymouth) uses numerous examples from New Zealand of how this spiritual direction approach to ministry is working to extend the pastoral offerings in congregations, chaplaincy and community contexts. The research papers listed below are well worth a read, especially Brian Hamilton's work when he was Anglican vicar in Tauranga.

Another way to expand this side of our work is to offer a series of quiet days or short retreats focusing on one of the disciplines at each event. Another is to offer a series of retreats in daily life

that do the same – inputs in the morning or evening during a week with time for some one-to-one discussion as well.

## Resources

Sue Pickering. *Spiritual direction – A Practical Introduction*. Canterbury Press. 2008. pp 221. A New Zealand based exploration of spiritual direction and its application to pastoral work and ministry, youth work, chaplaincy.

Sheila Pritchard. *The Lost Art of Meditation - deepening your prayer life*. Scripture union. 2003. pp 120.

Three research papers written here in NZ and available on the Spiritual Growth Ministries website: [www.sgm.org.nz/research\\_papers.htm](http://www.sgm.org.nz/research_papers.htm)

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See also [www.oasisretreatcentre.org.nz](http://www.oasisretreatcentre.org.nz) for Oasis Brochures on various areas of the spiritual life, e.g. Praying the Scriptures; Journalling; Contemplation; Silence and Solitude

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# Living in the Rules

*Selwyn Yeoman, Coastal Unity Parish, Southern*

**I**n this presentation I want to fly a kite to discover how much resonance my concerns have with others. A kite flies only because it is tethered to the Earth, and this string is woven of four strands: 1. a concern about formation in Christ; what might be called "sanctification" – or too frequently, its apparent absence. 2. Discoveries about the power of monastic rules and the many contemporary ways in which these are being re-appropriated. 3. Some ideas from a paper by Justin Taylor about formative routines in the pedagogy of Jesus. And 4. Reflection on Jeremiah's commentary on the Lord's prayer and its context in Luke's Gospel.

## 1. The challenge of formation or sanctification

Upon hearing of my proposal one colleague laughingly exploded, "don't talk to me about rules. That's what I've been struggling to escape from for most of my life". It is a reaction with which I have considerable sympathy and personal identification. I suspect that many of us have grown into Christian faith being shaped by a multitude of expectations that were often only indirectly spoken, or if articulated this was not within any clearly integrated Biblical and theological framework. To the extent that they represented the anxieties of our own parents, pastors, or teacher/leaders, they may have been delivered with considerable personal authority but not necessarily the authority of the Church catholic, that is, the wisdom of a wider believing community. In different contexts, they have been the air we have unconsciously breathed, often shaping our feelings rather than our thinking, and asserting themselves puzzlingly and unexpectedly at moments of challenge or change. Frequently they make themselves conscious to us as uneasy feelings of guilt.

In reaction to all of this, we have developed strongly individualist conceptions of Christian life, in which each of us tries to find our own way. Spiritual practices, especially liturgical and corporate ones, are rejected as dead, oppressive or formalistic. Such reactions are not necessarily liberating, nor conducive to growth and maturity. Consciously and unconsciously, we define ourselves by our dislikes and our reactions. Strong pastors may articulate a vision for their church but we may or may not buy into it, and it may or may not bear any relationship to how other people are being formed in Christian discipleship in other places – even in the congregation that meets across the road from

ours. And they may or may not be informed by either pastoral theory concerning spiritual growth, or theological and historical reflection upon the methods and emphases of Jesus. Church thus loses its character as a sign and place of formation of the Kingdom – the new society – and becomes instead a shop-front for consumerist religion. Individual believers are more likely to find that when challenges arise at home, work, or from the socio-politics of the day, there is little in the way of inner resource or wider wisdom to draw upon for authentic Christ-like response. This is even more the case in regard to those public issues where it could be especially important to have the response of a common mind. The default position is one of reactive self-justification.

Perhaps I have been a singularly ineffective pastor, but I have witnessed this often enough to be asking, “why don’t we look more saved?” Is there something, some means of formation, that can recognise the need for personal, individual engagement, while locating this inextricably within the Christian tradition and the call of Christ to a communal existence?

## 2. The power of monastic Rules:

My doctoral study has impressed upon me the widespread influence of Christian monasticism to engage people in life-transforming practices. Asceticism has not always meant negativity about the body but often a desire to confront self-centredness by a renewed connection with Creation, living a common life under a Rule, dedicated to seeking God, being formed in Christ, and being a sign of an alternative sociality. Protestantism has inherited a gut reaction to all this history but along with its failures we need to re-examine its strengths, one of which is simply its power to keep engaging and inspiring people for nearly two millennia. Many commentators have believed that the early Church practised highly communal, and thus highly accountable and formative, ways of life. Paul’s letter to Philemon is certainly prefaced in such a way as to suggest that Philemon is not going to be left to his own private devices in working out how he will respond to the return of Onesimus. Apphia, Archippus, and the church that meets in his house are all included in the address. Certainly, by the time of the Constantinian adoption of Christianity, there was a growing movement of believers seeking more committed forms of discipleship than the Roman establishment seemed to encourage, and they found their inspiration in what they read of the early Church in Acts.

We first see this movement most clearly in those known as the desert fathers and mothers, many of whom had abandoned small farms or the life of artisans in the towns, in order to retreat to the desert. Some were genuine hermits, but most formed loose communities, seeking spiritual direction, engaging in manual work, study, and extended prayer, and gathering at least weekly for common meals and Eucharistic worship. Theirs are not formally adopted Rules but clearly articulated practices that people could choose to submit themselves to. Nevertheless, these forms of life were often highly individualistic and ill-disciplined, and often at odds with even the best pastoral and formational discipline of the church. Pachomius and Athanasius first, but Basil of Caesarea and John Cassian much more effectively, from about 360 onwards, attempted to weave together the two approaches.

Basil’s Rules began as mid-week Bible studies for keen members of the congregation. His whole account of discipleship is located within a Eucharistic narrative that begins with Creation, and the beauty of God that can be discerned there, and ends looking to the establishment of the Kingdom of God – and in the meantime, we are to live here as citizens of heaven. All this found its outworking in a community established by his sister Macrina and mother Emmelia on the family estate. Unlike the monasticism of the desert, they made no provision at all for the contemplative hermit, but did develop forms of monasticism with a focus on medical care, farming, and relief of poverty.

Even more significant for all of us in the Western traditions is the Benedictine form of monasticism. Benedict gathered his first community in about 500 AD during a time of violence, warfare, and social breakdown that even today beggars belief. His Rule may appear to us unusually pedantic in places but it was formative for people whose lives had known nothing but violence, disorder and a complete absence of even the most rudimentary education. The movement was the major player in the evangelisation of much of western and northern Europe, and its monasteries were often the only centres of learning, administrative assistance, medical and pastoral care throughout the medieval period. All the spirituality nurtured by the Daily Office, and Protestant Bible reading disciplines unknowingly derived from it, have their origins in the Benedictine round of daily and weekly worship.

Alongside enclosed monastic communities, there were always large numbers who attempted to live

monastic disciplines in their families, and on their farms or in towns. Not all monastic writers speak well of these people, but they represent a recognition of the value for authentic Christian formation, of some kind of Rule for one to be shaped by. In time, the mendicant orders abandoned altogether any conception of stability in a place, and opted instead for life as beggars on the roads or in the cities.

Benedictine monasticism is now a shadow of its former self, but the 20th century has seen an explosion of attempts at Christian formation under some kind of common discipline: Anglican Benedictines and Franciscans, Bonhoeffer's community at Finkenwald (and the still much appreciated "Life Together" that issued from there), the Taizé community, Iona, the base Communities of the South American Catholic churches, the Covenant Communities of the charismatic renewal, and even more home-grown, the communities associated with the "Servants" organisation or the "Urban Vision" movement. All this is now being promoted as a new monasticism. With little awareness of this background, even the covenanted men's small groups inspired by the Promise Keepers movement can be seen as part of the same general dynamic.

Nevertheless, all this is not always without its eccentricities, domineering leaders, and sometimes self-righteous airs of superiority. Is there something common to us all that can recognise the call of Christ to a communal existence, and have formative power, while also recognising the realities of individual circumstances?

### 3. "The charismatisation of routine"

This expression comes from Justin Taylor, in a paper at the recent ANZATS conference, in which he questioned and upended Weber's thesis as applied to the life of the early Church. Contrary to those who posit a deep discontinuity between the life and ministry of Jesus and that of the early Church, Taylor argues that Jesus' pedagogy, as well as his inauguration of the Kingdom, was from the beginning based upon the formative power of practices. Into these routines his followers were inaugurated, and by them bore witness to the in-breaking new order. They then took on a whole new significance – a "charismatisation" – in the post-Pentecost experience of the Holy Spirit. Eucharistic practice is the clearest example but he explores others as well, including teaching on money, accountability and confession. In all these there are clear connections to be drawn between the Gospels and Acts, and aspects of the earliest communities as we may discern them in Paul's letters. The point is that Jesus was not the free-spirited Galilean hippie, much beloved of those who grew up in the late 1960s, but always was one who taught by means of integrated disciplines intended to form citizens of the Kingdom.

This argument relates closely to the issue explored by Jeremias in relation to the Lord's Prayer, in his broader study on the prayers of Jesus.

### 4. The Lord's Prayer as a rule of life for all Christians

In Luke 11, having observed Jesus at prayer, the disciples come to him and ask that he teach them to pray, "just as John taught his disciples."

Jeremias argues that it was common rabbinic practice to give one's disciples a prayer that would encapsulate the rabbi's teaching and shape the lives of those being formed by that teaching. The suggestion is that John the Baptist had done so for his disciples, and certainly Acts 19 suggests that, years after John's death, there were still people living according to a discipline that he had initiated. Pharisees appear to have done this, and also the Essenes. Now Jesus' disciples want a prayer appropriate for the teaching and life of the Kingdom, whose coming Jesus is inaugurating, and into whose life he is initiating them. The "Lord's Prayer" is Jesus' response, and we should note that although there are differences between the version in Luke, and that in Matthew, this very fact suggests some regularity in the way disciples are initiated into it. Not any old kind of prayer but THIS prayer is the life of the disciples of Jesus.

Matthew's more liturgical and Jewish version suggests that it was always a common prayer of the community. By the end of the first Century, the Didache presumes and recommends its regular use, but it also appears to have been regarded as the gift for those who were baptised and was taught only to those who were being prepared for baptism.

So here we have the encapsulation of Jesus' ministry, given as a prayer for both the community and the most enthusiastic individuals, and given so that the Spirit may form these people into particular

ways of life. If we want something that meets the various needs I have pondered, this might be it! Its brevity allows for great flexibility in the way we engage with it, so at this point I could turn the task over to you. How would you engage this prayer for the process of forming people after the mind of Christ?

But I will make a few more comments of my own: Six elements. Each presents a possibility for meditative questioning. Each requires or implies that the prayer is accompanied by some particular practice.

1. ABBA = the intimacy of home, of identity, of trust. To address God in this way is, according to Jeremias, the unique characteristic of Jesus' prayer and it is a relationship into which he invites his disciples. And not the 12 only, for the use of ABBA in Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6 is clear evidence that this experience of belonging (adoption and new birth are both NT images) was a continuing element in their "charismatic" experience of the Holy Spirit. We have here something "given" that represents both the most formal and the most extempore elements of Christian praying. Strengthening this connection with the experience of the Holy Spirit, some ancient texts place the prayer within the baptism service, and add into it a prayer, or a thanksgiving, for the gift of the Holy Spirit. As belonging and identity, ABBA also reminds us of our communal identity. We are children, brothers and sisters, and this finds expression in the use of the prayer at the Lord's table. In worship, teaching, pastoral care and spiritual direction, a primary function is to nurture this consciousness of grace, of gifted identity. It's deeply personal, yet equally requires participation with others to help people cultivate this in their own life of prayer. We too have to teach people to pray, but we do so with the Holy Spirit.

2. "Hallowing the name": cultivating the mystery of God, whose name may not be spoken, yet who has drawn near to be known. It's about cultivating praise and praying eschatologically – with an eye on that future when the whole Earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord. This represents a messianic longing, and a missional vision.

3. For the coming of the Kingdom, and the "earthing" of God's will: another eschatological element but a reminder that the life of the Kingdom, the new order, is being inaugurated here now, even though we live between the times. It's about not being content with the present state of affairs (a kind of Niebuhrian accommodation), nor being so despairing of the world as to place all our hopes over the eschatological horizon but about participating in the healing of Creation.

The life of the Kingdom is expressed in two ways

4. The prayer for daily bread – again an eschatological element. It's about the bread of the life to come and the fellowship of the Eucharistic meal. In that case, it's also an anticipation of the eternal Sabbath, with all the Sabbath implications for rest, peace, justice, the care of Creation and the recognition of the Earth as a place of provision. Here the prayer engages us with all the issues around food and consumerism.

5. The prayer for forgiveness as we forgive – an honesty about our lives before God and others. It's about inviting attention to relationships, and the life of mutuality, self examination and accountability, as well as sometimes costly peacemaking and the restorative/liberating heart of the Gospel. Given the centrality of this in the teaching of Jesus, we should expect to see it as one of the ongoing struggles of Christian existence, and a focus of pastoral attention.

Finally 6. For deliverance and preservation. This concerns humility about our own capacities – we are not as strong as we like to think we are, and our strengths can also be our greatest weaknesses, as well as realism about the world. The world is not yet all that God intends it to be. There is evil, temptation, and persecution – all directed to having us give up on the Kingdom vision. There will be suffering and martyrdoms, as for the first and 20th centuries, so in all likelihood for this one. It's part of sharing with Christ in his death, and if we are preserved from all romanticism, we are more likely to be preserved also in our faith. So help us to live gracefully. Exploring it more positively, John Bluck, and Muru Walters, suggest this is a prayer, "for the courage to throw ourselves into the adventure of loving the most unloveable people in the unloveliest of places."

Everything in this prayer is coloured by the vision of the Kingdom. That new citizenship is what is being formed in those who are shaped by it. In its origin with Jesus as "prayed practice" and in all its possibilities, it can function as a rule of life for the transformation of all Christians – and incidentally, as a vision to call those who are not, yet. What if we made this the foundation and the scaffolding for all else that we did in our own spirituality and in our public ministries?



# Passage to India

Martin Baker

**I find it hard not to think differently about the world, God's mission and my place in it after spending time with Christian workers who have devoted their lives to the slums of Rajahmundry. Rajahmundry features in no tourist books but is a city about the size of Wellington on the banks of the huge Godavari River, between Hyderabad and the Bay of Bengal. My family travelled there over the Christmas holidays.**

Our association with Rajahmundry was formed through my wife Sandy's role on the board of World Vision. World Vision New Zealand plays a key role in the support and monitoring of this project. Close friends of ours (who we had arranged to meet there) had, on a previous visit, been so inspired by what was happening that they, in an extraordinary act of generosity, decided to use their means to fund the majority of the project's costs over the next three years.

While it is easy to list the social woes affecting these slum dwellers: human trafficking, AIDS, child labour, illiteracy, terrible maternal health and the rest, it is far more difficult to describe the transformation that is taking place in the life of this community. This small group of faithful Christian workers have been instrumental in bringing an end to the worst depravations of child labour, providing innovative ways to support enterprise, reducing trafficking, vastly improving the aspirations of young women and finding ways to enable the desperately poor to gain an education. While the growth of the Indian economy proceeds at an astounding rate, the work of this small team speaks of an even greater miracle born out of hope, unyielding commitment to the poor, worship and prayer.

Theoretical debates about the nature of mission and evangelism evaporate in this tide of unrelenting grace. The work here goes so far beyond good works. The knowledge among these communities that there is someone committed to them, there for them, mindful of them, and that all these things are what it means to be Christian, is an extraordinarily powerful witness. It is not a matter of what these Christians do, but who they are.

On the final day that we were there, I had the privilege of conducting a small Bible study. I reflected on the times when the Greek word *splanchnizomai* is used in the New Testament. In English it is translated to describe the compassion the father feels as he runs to embrace his prodigal son; the same feeling Jesus has for the hungry crowds before they are fed, the feeling of the Samaritan as he sees the naked and injured man beside the road. This strange word, which I am sure I mispronounce, relates to some profound gut response felt by the one who both sees and who has the power to bring healing, feeding or reconciliation. It was a way for me of speaking to this small team about how I saw the basis of their motivation to commit their lives to this costly and transforming work.

A summary of the understanding of mission that I came away from this intense, brief experience, would include:

- Mission requires a particular way of seeing. The consequence of this seeing is engagement, compassion, solidarity and a profound sense of commonality. It may be more difficult to see in this way when our view is mediated through some other media.
- Mission is based on some "gut" relationship of compassion and concern with those with whom we are involved. It is never patronising.
- Mission makes a difference that needs to be articulated and not romanticised. There are outcomes, accountabilities and stewardship that require ongoing testing, discussion and review.
- Mission means change for us all. In the way we regard ourselves, others, our relationship with God and our possessions.

Christian mission is based on the profound unity that all humanity finds in relationship to God and celebrates in worship and the sacraments.

On returning from India, I guess one of the things I have come to realise even more acutely is how easily we use the word "mission". It comes to mean everything and anything and can be used as the tag line to justify any kind of endeavour. Perhaps a little more fear and trembling wouldn't go amiss when we reflect on the fact that for many of our Christian brothers and sisters in poorer countries, fulfilling God's mission is inextricably woven in with vulnerability, sacrifice and a profound dependence on God's providence.