

# A Short Guide to Sue's Sabbatical

By Rev Sue Male

Andy asked me for an article for *In-touch* about my sabbatical. Many people have asked me since I came back, "What did you do"? Well, the best way to answer that is in a list. The list is chronological in so far as I can remember:

- Carried on working much more than full time for the first two weeks
- Got tired
- Spent a week on a silent retreat at St Beunos Jesuit Spirituality Centre with one aim – "to move from work mode to sabbatical mode"
- God was good
- I came home, accepted loose ends and handed everything over
- I really did switch off from the Circuit and Ministry issues
- I went to Glastonbury
- I visited my Parents in Minehead for three lots of five days
- Phil and I attended "Christ the Saviour" Anglican Church in Ealing Broadway each Sunday at 8 AM!
- We went on a church weekend away with that church, making new friends and having deep conversations, putting the world to rights.
- We visited Canterbury – twice – once including a whole day UNESCO tour learning about early Christianity in that place
- We visited the Taize community in France for a week, joining in with worship, study, work and community life.
- I attended Northolt Methodist Church when Phil was preaching at Pentecost and heard a great sermon!
- We also attended Bless Community Church in Ealing, St Albans Cathedral, Canterbury Cathedral, and Minehead Methodist Church
- I studied ....
  - Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century
  - Philosophy in the twentieth Century
  - The theology of Hans Urs Von Balthazar
  - "Women in the Old Testament"
  - A course on Cicero
- I also read ( or at least listened to) the whole five-part series of Ken Follet's "Pillars of the Earth" series which looks at the development of Catholicism, Anglicanism and Methodism over 6 centuries.

So I DID a lot. I feel really privileged to have been given the opportunity to do all of these things. Studying is so much more accessible to me now than it was at the time I had to do it. I have always thirsted for learning., When I was a child – and could see – I would often be found sitting in my room at my desk with my Dad’s “Self – Educator” book in front of me learning something new. You have also heard my story of attending Rev’d Jonathan Hustler’s Bible Study on Logos when both he and I were in our twenties. I did not understand. I had only been back in church for a matter of months. Far from being put off by that it was the point that cemented me. I realised there was a whole mass of things I did not understand about Christianity, God, the Bible, even Jesus and Logos, and I was hooked. I wanted to learn more and more and through it draw closer and closer to god, and study DOES do that for me, and that desire has never gone away. So one thing that sabbatical is is an opportunity to draw closer and closer to God in whatever way suits the person taking the sabbatical.

Being in a congregation and not leading is also important to me. I try to do this occasionally when I am working but it often gets pushed out due to a busy schedule. When I am leading my head and mind are usually active. They need to be really if I am to make any sense! (although I guess it is possible that my congregations will disagree with that assertion) Somebody once said to me though that every Christian needs to spend at least some time every day in silence in order to simply know that we are loved by God. I manage that on some work days – the walk between appointments helps me with that when I have time, or turning up early for a service in a church where there is quiet before the service (not exactly Methodist) or to be honest sometimes just switching off and joining God in prayer when my family are watching TV .. but these times are not frequent when working. On sabbatical lots of silence before worship, a whole week in silence at St Beunos, “silence” for hours at Taize WHILST singing the Taize chants, silence for moments staring at the architecture of Churches, Cathedrals .. and well yes, OK, sometimes bridges too!

So sabbatical is about doing whatever assures you of God’s love for you  
Many special things remain with me. You will hear them over time I am sure. I will mention only two here.

At the end of my sabbatical, I did not want to go away again. I had been much away and wanted to make sure I did not return to work as exhausted as I left. I did a retreat with London Jesuit Centre this time which involved zoom calls with a Spiritual Director each day. The aim this time – to get me from sabbatical mode back to work mode.

One of the items I was given to pray with was a recording of a song – Matt Redman’s “Benediction”. I was transfixed by it. It contains the words of the Priest’s blessing – “The Lord Bless you and Keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you, the Lord look on you with kindness and give you peace”. My prayer about this? A desire to be in church, and to say this blessing ... not for the purpose of dismissing people in God’s love but because I wanted to join them all in coffee afterwards and catch up with them. Well, at least I am honest ... and here definitely, God was re-orienting me towards work and all the people I would see there.

The final thing I did in my sabbatical was visit my parents for the third time. Life is tough for them and I try to visit when I have leave. Usually I visit on week days because I am preaching at weekends but I visited this time on the final weekend before coming home. Apart from the clandestine Northolt visit with Phil I had not been in a Methodist Church for three months.

Phil and I decided we would go to Minehead Methodist Church. I had been to many churches in my sabbatical .. all lovely ... this one felt like home as soon as I entered! Methodists are so friendly! On top of that it was a Holy Communion Service. As soon as the Minister started to lead the liturgy tears began to roll down my face. Tears of joy, love desire. THIS was my job. THIS was my purpose. I wanted to come back and I wanted to do it myself!

Sabbaticals are about finding those things which ensure you that you are where God wants you to be ( or help you to find that place of course if you are not). So ... that’s enough words, there will be much more to share – in due course – I hope that some of what I have learned – intellectually and spiritually will be passed to you and open you up to God’s leading onwards of you in your own – personal – and purposeful lives for Him.

Thank you to all of you for facilitating for me this special time with God.

Sue