Traveling Well
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## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert B. Kruschwitz</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why We Need a Vacation</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karl Aho</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Discipline of Christian Pilgrimage</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian T. George</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divine Hours Spent Hiking with God</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cindy Crosby</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting God (Again) in Spiritual Retreat</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeanie Miley</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning Mission Trips that Matter</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curt Kruschwitz</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While on the Long Emmaus Road</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David W. Music</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worship Service</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric L. Mathis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Night Escape</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi J. Hornik</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry Ossawa Tanner, <em>Flight into Egypt</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Evening Walk</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi J. Hornik</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry Ossawa Tanner, <em>Jesus and His Disciples on Their Way to Bethany</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joined by Christ on the Path</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi J. Hornik</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lelio Orsi, <em>The Walk to Emmaus</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Pilgrimage in Italy</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric Howell</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*continued*
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Introduction

As we travel about, we inevitably return home transformed by the places we visit and persons we meet, if we pay them loving attention. Our contributors examine the trips we take—for vacation, pilgrimage, retreat, or short-term missions—and how we can travel well.
When we choose destinations closely associated—through art, architecture, or a saint’s life—with God’s mission in the world, our traveling shades into the practice of pilgrimage. In On Pilgrimage in Italy (p. 74), Eric Howell explains that “pilgrimage is a journey nearer to the heart of God and deeper into life with God. The hope of all pilgrimage is realized when we have renewed eyes to be happily surprised by God’s mysterious presence in all times and places, even at home.” Christian George, in The Discipline of Christian Pilgrimage (p. 19), sketches the history of this ancient practice from its inception to later criticism and its contemporary renewal. He commends pilgrimage for Christians of all ages and abilities, “as a spiritual discipline that reflects our journey to God, that gives great energy to our sanctification, and that engenders a spiritual vitality that is both Christo-centric and community-driven.”

Jeanie Miley explores another intentionally worshipful form of travel in Meeting God (Again) in Spiritual Retreat (p. 38). “We experience retreat in many ways,” she explains, as she shares her familiarity with various inspirational, silent, and family retreats. “We prepare for retreat by simply opening our minds and hearts to the desire to meet God,” she writes, “and we give up grading how it went by our standards of evaluation and simply trust that our efforts will produce the fruit that we need, perhaps not from our perspective, but from God’s.” Hiking through and caring for the remnants of tallgrass prairie near her Chicago suburb has become a regular form of retreat for Cindy Crosby. In Divine Hours Spent Hiking with God (p. 28), she says, “I am wired for the outdoors, the cathedral of sky, the carpet of grasses and wildflowers, the hymns of birds and insects,” and so she often goes to the prairie “to pay attention” to God’s creation and “recalibrate [her] relationship with God.”

Many Christians in North America have participated in short-term mission trips that blend vacation, retreat, and service. Some critics have questioned the high cost and ineffectiveness of such travel. “Carelessly assembled short-term mission trips may jeopardize long-term ministry and create unhealthy dependencies,” Curt Kruschwitz admits in Planning Mission Trips that Matter (p. 47), but he believes “when framed in the context of joining God’s mission and used to nurture spiritual growth, they can be of immense value to God’s kingdom.” Matt Waller offers a fascinating take on his years as a missionary kid, short-term mission trip participant, and agricultural missionary in Enroute to Home (p. 79). Those cross-cultural experiences, he says, prepared him to travel faithfully “further from home” in his journalism career, “away from the insulated comfort of church culture and into lands of cosmopolitan secularism.”

Throughout Scripture, travel narratives serve to highlight how God directs and accompanies people through their lives and prepares them for loving communion with God. Heidi Hornik explores artistic depictions of
three such stories in the Gospels. In *The Night Escape* (p. 68), she reviews Henry Ossawa Tanner’s *Flight into Egypt*, a moving interpretation of the holy family’s clandestine trip to evade King Herod’s assassins. Tanner’s *Jesus and His Disciples on Their Way to Bethany* is her subject in *An Evening Walk* (p. 70). In *Joined by Christ on the Path* (p. 72), she considers Lelio Orsi’s *The Walk to Emmaus*. Hornik observes, “Gospel travel narratives highlight theological points, not geographical details,” and this causes a problem for painters who must depict particular visual details. She explains how Tanner and Orsi carefully incorporated specific details to guide viewers to the biblical source narratives and the theological insights they contain.

The worship service (p. 58) by Eric Mathis includes biblical psalms and stories of pilgrimage that draw us to honor the God who creates, sustains, and travels with us through life. The liturgy incorporates David Music’s new hymn, “While on the Long Emmaus Road” (p. 55), which concludes with these words of promise: “In all our travel, let us see / the journey as a jubilee; / our hopes refreshed, our dreams restored, / for as we go, we take the Lord.”

“Can a short-term mission trip be meaningful for participants and hosts, and be fun?” Tyler Garrard wonders as he plans a trip for his congregation. In *Resources for Short-Term Missions* (p. 84), Garrard reviews four books that address that tension: Don C. Richter’s *Mission Trips That Matter: Embodied Faith for the Sake of the World*, Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert’s *Helping without Hurting in Short-Term Missions: Leader’s Guide*, Brian M. Howell’s *Short-Term Mission: An Ethnography of Christian Travel Narrative and Experience*, and the anthology *Effective Engagement in Short-Term Missions: Doing It Right!* edited by Robert J. Priest. All of these authors “illustrate that despite the best of intentions, it is not always possible to do a trip ‘right,’ to say how a trip matters or to whom it matters, and to do no harm,” Garrard notes. Yet their books are helpful because “they consider the how and the why of trips, explore issues with cross-cultural travel, and suggest structural changes to the common approach toward short-term missions.”

In *Toward a Theology of Pilgrimage* (p. 89), John Gatta reviews Jim Forest’s *The Road to Emmaus: Pilgrimage as a Way of Life*, N. T. Wright’s *The Way of the Lord: Christian Pilgrimage Today*, and Charles Foster’s *The Sacred Journey* (The Ancient Practices Series). He commends N. T. Wright’s discerning evaluation that “physical journeying and the veneration of holy sites can indeed nurture our faith—so long as we understand such practices to be signposts or icons of the deeper reality we seek. Otherwise they are apt to become distractions or delusions.” Agreeing with Foster’s observation that ours is indeed a “God who walks,” Gatta concludes: “Extending the principle metaphorically, we might envision our life-project as a long sojourn not only toward God but with this God who walks. Walking that way, we have reason to welcome every new and surprising turn in the path, to perceive all that surrounds our trail illumined by grace.”
Why We Need a Vacation

BY KARL AHO

When done well, personal and family vacations can be a corrective to both our overweening busyness and our fear of creaturely dependency. Moreover, Søren Kierkegaard suggests, they can be a joyful welcome of our grace-filled relationship with God.

At first glance, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) may seem like an unlikely advocate for personal and family vacationing. After all, this Christian philosopher and theologian did not marry and start his own family, and he rarely journeyed away from his native Copenhagen, Denmark. Despite these biographical disadvantages, however, Kierkegaard’s status as a nineteenth-century thinker in the classical tradition of virtue ethics gives him a singular perspective on vacationing. That’s because we tend to associate that tradition with ancient writers like Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, or with medieval thinkers like Augustine, Gregory the Great, and Thomas Aquinas, and we doubt that they have much to say about vacationing. By contrast, Kierkegaard reflects on work and leisure from a modern perspective, and so he engages practices like taking personal and family vacations that were largely foreign to those earlier authors.

Kierkegaard usually thinks about work and leisure from the perspective of “the common man” — that is, the sad rural and urban Danes rather than his own fairly well-off middle class.1 The prosperous Copenhagen of his day offered significant new opportunities for personal and family leisure: for example, Tivoli, one of the oldest amusement parks in the world, opened there in 1843, the same year in which Kierkegaard began to publish. The park plays a critical role in his discussion of human finitude in Concluding Unscientific Postscript (1846). So, Kierkegaard was well aware of the emergence of the middle class, the leisure opportunities that its wealth provided, and some of the challenges that the new modes of vacationing posed for
both lower- and middle-class families.

I will draw insights into the practice of taking vacations from three facets of Kierkegaard’s thinking. First, his warning about the vice of busyness reminds us not only of how important vacations are, but of how easily they can become just another busy distraction from the most significant relationships in our lives. His account of a person worrying about whether to visit Tivoli can help us accept our need for vacations. Finally, his view of the sufficiency of grace will help us rejoice in life with family and friends, and by extension in the world we experience with them on vacation.

Avoiding the Vice of Busyness

Sometimes our moral vocabulary really goes wanting. The moral landscape surrounding work is a good case in point. For example, Kierkegaard admits we do not have a name for the virtue that encompasses being rightly related to our work. This unnamed virtue includes habitual patterns of understanding the meaning of our work, caring for the work we do, having the right feelings about it, and doing it for the proper reasons, in the best ways, at the appropriate times, and so on. In other words, this virtue represents the right way to relate to our work.

The virtue is poised between two tempting vices we must avoid. About one of these—the vice of deficiency—we are very worried, and so we have a name for it: we call it “sloth” when we do not do enough work, or do not care enough about the work we do, and so on. But about the vice at the other extreme—the vice of excess—we speak much less often. Kierkegaard calls this vice “busyness,” and cautioning us against it is one of his central tasks.

In his first published work, Either/Or: A Fragment of Life (1843), Kierkegaard showcases two characters who explain, through short writings, how they understand life. One character observes,

The most ludicrous of all ludicrous things, it seems to me, is to be busy in the world, to be a man who is brisk at his meals and brisk at his work.... What, after all, do these busy bustlers achieve? Are they not just like the woman who, in a flurry because the house was on fire, rescued the fire-tongs?  

What more important thing in life are these hurried people missing? Kierkegaard would say their daily bustling distracts them from our common human calling: to become who we are, to grow into the loving, productive selves that God intends for us to be. For Kierkegaard, this selfhood is both a gift and a task—something we receive from God and others, and something we achieve through our attentiveness to it as a project. When we are lazy or slothful, we do not pursue this calling because it seems difficult. When we are consumed by busyness, we pursue too many other, less important things instead. In other words, when we become preoccupied with mundane tasks, we fail to occupy our lives with what is truly important, which
Kierkegaard elsewhere calls “the idea for which I can live or die.”

We may be inadvertently sidetracked by this sort of busyness due to the pressure of events, but sometimes we thoroughly intend and plan to be busily distracted. A clever example of such planning appears in the essay “Rotation of Crops” later in *Either/Or*. The character-author of this text, the Aesthete, claims to have developed a sure-fire method for avoiding boredom: he focuses only on the enjoyable aspects of each situation. For example, when attending a lecture that has become too boring, he makes a game of watching the beads of sweat that are dripping down the lecturer’s face. Today we have a new word for such gamesmanship: we call it “multi-tasking.” Instead of refocusing our attention on the lecture, we choose to do something else (just as trivial, perhaps, as cataloging curious features of the speaker).

The Aesthete says he is ‘rotating his crops’ by constantly shifting his attention to whatever does not bore him. We might think that this rotation method is great—after all, who wants to focus on a boring lecture? But as the essay continues, we glimpse some disturbing consequences of this stratagem. For example, the Aesthete warns us against committing to friendship or marriage, because caring too strongly about individual persons entails paying attention to them even when, like the lecture, their lives become unexciting or difficult to follow. There will be many times, he predicts, that we will prefer to be preoccupied with other persons or activities, that we will enjoy being too busy for our friends or spouses. We will want the freedom to ‘rotate our crops.’

Of course, Kierkegaard fully expects us to see through the Aesthete’s perspective because we value the great goods of friendship and marriage. Through this episode, Kierkegaard is warning us away from the vice of busyness for this reason: being overly busy with our own pleasure and concerns makes us less open to and caring towards the people around us, especially those close friends and family members with whom we share life.

Now one insight we might draw from Kierkegaard’s counsel is that if we find ourselves becoming too busily preoccupied with work, we should take a vacation. That’s probably true. But let’s think harder about what we do on that vacation: busy people tend to fill their leisure with distracting busyness too. I confess that I struggle with doing too much during vacations: I want to see too many sights or visit too many people. That is a recipe for

For Kierkegaard, selfhood is a gift and a task—something we receive from God and others, and something we achieve through our attentiveness to it as a project. When we are consumed by busyness, we pursue other, less important things instead.
Traveling Well

avoiding true, lasting connections with my fellow travelers, the places we go, and the new people we meet there. Furthermore, when my wife tries to curb my tendency toward busyness on vacation, I sometimes drift into the opposite extreme of not trying hard enough to connect with family and friends or to enjoy our time traveling together. If we really hear what Kierkegaard is saying, we will try to avoid distracting busyness during our vacations. It would be spiritually foolish to avoid busyness at work only to succumb to it while we are at leisure.

WISELY WELCOMING OUR DEPENDENCE ON DIVERSIONS

Kierkegaard addresses the modern vacation most directly through his discussion of Tivoli in his curiously titled work, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*. This title makes a joke on several levels, and deciphering it helps us understand Kierkegaard’s approach to our topic.

Of course, a postscript is usually just a short note at the end of a letter or a book, but Kierkegaard’s *Postscript* is several times longer than the *Philosophical Fragments* (1844) that came before. Furthermore, in no sense is the *Postscript* “concluding”: it is not the last book Kierkegaard wrote (as he originally planned for it to be), nor does it answer the questions posed in or tie up the loose ends left dangling in the *Philosophical Fragments*. These incongruities in the title—that *Postscript* is actually a very big book and not a conclusion—are just two indications of the humorous yet serious authorial voice that Kierkegaard adopts throughout the work. He uses this voice to de-emphasize his authority as its writer, and thus to force his readers to pursue the fundamental truths—namely, the ones that a person might live or die for—as individuals.

Kierkegaard calls the *Postscript* “unscientific” to draw attention to the difference between scientific and unscientific approaches to fundamental truths. From a “scientific”—that is, a systematic and purely objective—perspective, the primary goal of inquiry is to determine what is true. By contrast, the central issue of the *Postscript* is to establish the individual’s relationship to particular fundamentally important truths. This distinction is not meant to undermine the value of scientific inquiry, but to highlight the individual response required to our common human calling. Kierkegaard’s approach is “unscientific” insofar as he insists each individual must come to a life decision about really fundamental truths. His emphasis here on truth being “subjective” for each individual is not, however, a kind of relativism. “Kierkegaard’s claim that truth is subjectivity,” M. G. Piety explains, “means no more than that when ‘truth’ is prescriptive of an individual’s existence, the substance of the prescription ought to be expressed in that existence.” In other words, the truths that are most significant for human beings are like medical prescriptions for a deathly ill patient: they should not just be recognized or acknowledged, but immediately and consistently reflected in the patient’s life. The fundamental truths that Kierke-
gaard has in mind are religious—not merely the truth of Christianity, but also our relationship to that truth.

Kierkegaard uses Tivoli to illustrate how truths might be reflected in a person’s life. His example is of a rather self-sufficient, prosperous man who has finally come to admit (as an objective, scientific fact) that diversions are necessary for human life, but is unsure whether he should pursue on this particular day the pleasant distractions that Tivoli offers. First, the man acknowledges that his needful desire for diversion is not a mere momentary inclination. But recognizing his own neediness leads him to experience “the human irritability that really feels the sting of being dependent in this way.” We might describe this man as stung by a certain fear of traveling. He is simultaneously irritated about really needing a vacation, and afraid that taking this particular trip to the park rather than going to work will display his shameful human finitude to himself and others.

Now the more faithful way to respond to this irritability would be to give way to one’s need for diversions and acknowledge one’s dependence on them—and on the God who created human beings with such needs and who makes such diversions available. A faithful person, T. F. Morris imagines, might say, “I can still enjoy [Tivoli] as I desire it on the religious grounds of expressing to God that I have a human need to desire diversion.” So, the faithful person could visit Tivoli and relish its diversions not because visiting the amusement park is a way to cultivate one’s relationship with God, but because “it is the relationship with God that itself bids the religious person to seek elsewhere for a moment.”

For Kierkegaard, our human need for diversion is nothing to be ashamed of, because it expresses how we all stand equally in need of God. He explains, “he who actually was a religious person of such a kind that he could decide before God to go out to the amusement park will not be put to shame alongside any imperial highness.”

Kierkegaard expects us, his readers, to see ourselves in the character of the man deciding to visit Tivoli, and to judge for ourselves whether visiting the park is permissible. So, if diversions are necessary at some times but not every time, how are we to know when we should take a personal or family vacation? Like the man contemplating Tivoli, we might ask ourselves whether we, our friends, and family members really need a vacation, or
merely have a passing inclination for its diversions. This might seem like excessive reserve on Kierkegaard’s part, especially if it rules out every spur-of-the-moment vacation. However, I think Kierkegaard’s point is that we should evaluate potential vacations according to the real needs and lasting desires of all concerned, rather than their whims or inclinations. Thus if a spur-of-the-moment vacation promises to satisfy deep needs and desires, we should feel confident to take just such a vacation. My wife and I were fortunate to take this sort of trip last summer. Garth Brooks—her favorite musician since childhood—was playing a concert in Houston (which satisfied her desires), the Astros were playing the Yankees (which satisfied mine), and we were both enchanted by touring NASA’s Johnson Space Center. By choosing a vacation which spoke to each of our desires, we were able to enjoy a better trip than we would have if we had only gone to the concert or the ballpark, or had only followed a momentary whim to get out of town and avoid some less pleasant duties at home.

We can draw another lesson from Kierkegaard’s discussion of the independent man contemplating a trip to Tivoli: we should learn to welcome our vacations as expressions of our human dependence on God. We really want to be self-sufficient and in control of our lives. For this reason, overcoming our irritability about being dependent on God is easier described than done. Perhaps that is why we imagine that acknowledging our need for God will require a huge struggle culminating in some great feat, personal heroism, or religious experience. For Kierkegaard, however, acknowledging our human dependence is an action that anyone can do on a daily basis and through simple means. Yes, it is a significant deal, for “The highest His Imperial Highness is able to do, however, is to make his decision before God,” he explains, but “the acting can be done...fully as well when the person acting is a very simple person and the feat is to go out to the amusement park.”

Thus for Kierkegaard, acknowledging our dependence and need for diversions is difficult not because it requires heroism, but because acknowledging our dependence can occur even in the context of the humble vacation. Perhaps this is why he elsewhere criticizes those whose travels emphasize the destination rather than the needs and desires of those traveling:

Generally, people travel around the world to see rivers and mountains, new stars, colorful birds, freakish fish, preposterous races of mankind; they indulge in the brutish stupor that gawks at life and thinks it has seen something. That does not occupy me. 13

Having considered Kierkegaard’s discussion of visiting the amusement park, we can understand why he is not occupied by this sort of grand-sight-seeing, world travel. Such travel objectively serves as a splendid diversion, but fails in the more important inward movement of acknowledging one’s dependence.
EXPERIENCING THE JOY OF VACATIONING

While William Shakespeare’s character Hamlet clearly has earned the title “the melancholy Dane,” the label is sometimes applied to Søren Kierkegaard as well. And we might think that Kierkegaard is, on this topic, deserving of this dubious title if he had said no more about vacationing than this: when done well, vacations can be a corrective to our overweening busyness and our fear of creaturely dependency. These features may show why vacationing is spiritually important for creatures like us, but it hardly explains why it is fun.

Elsewhere, Kierkegaard does give us a reason to think vacations can be filled with joy. This reason is developed in *Practice in Christianity* (1850) in the context of the theme of equality before God. Humans are equal before God in the sense that divine grace is offered to every imperfect person—”that is, to everyone.” Beyond worthily accepting God’s grace, nothing further is required of us for salvation. And if God does have a special calling for anyone to follow as an individual, God will surely communicate it to the person.

The sufficiency of God’s grace frees us and empowers us to pursue relationships besides our relationship with God. Since we need not earn our salvation, Kierkegaard writes, “as for the rest, let him do his work and rejoice in it, love his wife and rejoice in her, joyfully bring up his children, love his fellow beings, and rejoice in life.” When we accept God’s gracious welcome, the great pressure to make ourselves happy by ourselves is removed. Relieved of this onerous chore, we can finally relax and rejoice in the world in general, and in the love of friends and family in particular. Kierkegaard is not always so sanguine about the possibilities of a joyful family life. But at least in this passage, he thinks we may enjoy such deeply personal relationships because of our grace-filled relationship with God.

Thus, for Kierkegaard, we should vacation with family and friends not only because vacations provide a counterbalance to the busyness of our lives and because our human finitude requires us to pursue diversions, but because our God-relationship frees us to enjoy God’s good creation with them. To rejoice in our families and friends and, through their companionship, in the wonders of creation is a deep gladness that God intends for us.

When we accept God’s gracious welcome, the pressure to make ourselves happy by ourselves is removed. Relieved of this onerous chore, we can relax and rejoice in the world in general, and in the love of friends and family in particular.
NOTES
5 In fact, Kierkegaard titles one of his later books Judge for Yourself!
7 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 496.
8 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 494-497.
10 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 497.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
14 Thus, one of the early English studies of the philosopher, by H. V. Martin, was ominously titled Kierkegaard: The Melancholy Dane, Philosophers’ Library Series, 3 (London, UK: Epworth Press, 1950).

KARL AHO
is a Ph.D. candidate in Philosophy at Baylor University.
Pilgrimage runs thickly through my veins. My parents named me for a pilgrim—Christian, the main character in John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress. For years I traveled the world, seeing how God intervened in time and space to accomplish his will through the lives of men and women who took seriously their faith. From monastery to monastery, I traversed the globe, chanting with monks at Taizé, France; climbing the staircase of Skellig Michael, Ireland; and walking up the breezy hills of Iona, Scotland.

These pilgrimages made the past come alive. I saw the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt, Germany, where Martin Luther wrestled with Scripture; the Orthodox monastery of Penteli, Greece, where monks taught children to read and write; and the Franciscan monastery of Monteluco in Spoleto, Italy, where Saint Francis fasted and prayed.

Being a pilgrim gave me a three-dimensional picture of God’s interaction in this world. These journeys taught me that Christians were made for motion—progressing in our relationship with Christ, overcoming obstacles that rust our faith, and gaining stamina to battle the world, the flesh, and the devil. Most of all, they showed me that in order best to navigate the future, we need to travel back into the past.

The practice of pilgrimage predates the earthly life of Christ. In the Old Testament, God’s people constructed stone altars to remember what God had accomplished (Joshua 4:1–9). These rocks were tangible reminders of God’s
faithfulness to his people and became teaching aids for many generations. Sacred travels are sprinkled throughout the Scripture. From Abraham’s journey to the Exodus to the visit of the Magi, the motif of pilgrimage is deeply ingrained within the biblical narrative. Pilgrimage has long been a discipline for practitioners of the world’s major religions. Muslims take pilgrimages to Mecca, Buddhists to Mount Kailash, Hindus to Kedarnath, and Jews to Israel. Pilgrimages occur even among those who are not affiliated with religion. Secular pilgrimage destinations include the Declaration of Independence in the National Archives, the Eiffel Tower, and the pyramids of Giza.

**PILGRIMAGE THROUGH CHURCH HISTORY**

Pilgrimage is rooted in the soil of the human soul. It is practiced by Christians who seek to stretch their faith radically by discovering the God who invites us into sacred and risky intimacy.

Before the advent of the Constantinian Christianization of Rome in the fourth century, the practice of pilgrimage had long been an established reality in Israel. Throughout Second-Temple Judaism (537 BC–AD 70), the city of Jerusalem enjoyed throngs of pilgrims annually traveling to the Temple to observe the three festivals prescribed in Deuteronomy 16. However, after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 by the Roman armies of Titus, the diasporized Jews, being unable to perform physical pilgrimages to Jerusalem, did not entirely abandon their sojourning identity.

The Apostle Peter, in his letter to the churches of Asia Minor, appealed to the believers as *pariokoi kai parepidemoi*, resident aliens and pilgrims (1 Peter 2:11). These new *christianoi* inherited a thoroughly ingrained tradition of pilgrimage. Theirs was a traveling history, an Abrahamic faith that sought a city whose architect and builder was God, and in his letter to the church at Corinth, Clement of Rome begins his salutation with the following words, “The Church of God which sojourns at Rome, to the church of God sojourning at Corinth.”¹ By the time Constantine’s mother, Empress Helena, brought pilgrimage into vogue by traveling to the Holy Land in 326, a living tradition of *sancta loca*, or holy places, pertaining to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ had already materialized.

The practice of pilgrimage was not immune to criticism. Gregory of Nyssa, writing to a friend in the mid-fourth century, reflected on the particular dangers facing women on pilgrimages.² More notably, his theological objection that “change of place does not effect any drawing nearer unto God”³ was re-animated a thousand years later by Protestants protesting a medieval, work-based righteousness. Jerome (c. 347-420), who traveled to Bethlehem on pilgrimage, argued that a holy life is more important than a Jerusalem venture.⁴

And yet, in the Middle Ages, in a world saturated with chaos and calamity, when a third of the population would die from the bubonic plague, pilgrimage offered a constant reassurance that there was, indeed,
a road to God, a highway to heaven. Traveling on sacred stones positioned these peasants in direct continuity with a tradition beyond themselves, a legacy reaching all the way back to the Messiah of Galilee who himself embarked on a pilgrimage from the celestial to the terrestrial.

Medieval pilgrims traveled for many reasons: the veneration of relics, the demands of penance, the promise of miracles and healings. In her book *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England*, Susan Morrison notes that a large number of these pilgrims were mothers traveling to shrines, often barefoot, for the healing and resuscitation of their sick and dying children. 5

Throughout the Middle Ages, the practice of pilgrimage developed into a movement from the locus to the liminal, an outward manifestation of an inward reality, fueled by prayer, discipline, paintings, iconography, and relics. It was in this context that pilgrim travelers radically transcended the thresholds of geographical and spiritual familiarity, even to the ends of the earth. However, since most pilgrims could not afford a long and treacherous journey, for example to Jerusalem, a Milky Way of local cathedrals dotted the European landscape: Santiago de Compostela, Walsingham, Canterbury, Salisbury, Notre Dame, Ely, Winchester, and Durham, to name a few.

To understand the significance of medieval pilgrimage, we must enter the milieu of medieval experience. Imagine what it must have been like for peasants who had never traveled more than five miles from the place of their birth to journey for days and weeks through forests, mountains, and treacherous terrains, unaided by modern hygienic luxuries, susceptible to robbery and raids, pressing on through storm and wind and disease, until finally arriving at what must have looked to be a premonition of paradise itself. A building rises, startling at first to behold, with sky-scraping spires and gargoyles, embellished detailed stone work and golden reliquaries, life-sized apostolic sculptures and towering roods, all situated beneath Gothic arches that magically supported weighty mosaic ceilings above. Its tall nave, working in tandem with majestic organ music, pulls the eyes upward, off of oneself, off of the problems and plagues that come from living in a Dark Age, raising the gaze almost to God’s very being. And then there were the windows. Since most of the population in the Middle Ages was illiterate, vibrant stained glass illuminated a gospel that simple peas-
Pilgrims have unprecedented opportunities to venture to places like Iona, Mount Athos, Jerusalem, and Rome. Pilgrimage is a unifying commonality among Christians of every denomination, a point of contact that fosters reconciliation and ecumenism.

ants could not absorb from paper. As the Romanesque style gave way to the Gothic, pointed arches and flying buttresses allowed for the elimination of wall surface, resulting in walls of stained glass previously impossible to construct. Guilielmus Durandus, a thirteenth-century French theologian, wrote, “The glass windows in the church are holy scriptures which expel the wind and the rain, that is, all things hurtful, but transmit the light of the true sun, that is, God, into the hearts of the faithful.”

For those who were literate, *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer offered unique perspectives on pilgrimage prior to the Protestant Reformation. The popularity of *The Canterbury Tales* reflected the highly commercialized industry that medieval pilgrimage generated. Bands of pilgrims traveling to holy shrines perpetuated a radical *communitas* experienced by those from all walks and trades of life, each bearing his or her own personal narrative and cooperating as a single moving organism, traveling together from Southwark to Canterbury to see the place where Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, was beheaded by the knights of Henry II on December 29, 1170. In this way, pilgrimage fostered more than mere individualistic penitentiary practices, allowing for a peripatetic *koinonia* stimulated by danger and devotion.

Though criticism of pilgrimage existed from Late Antiquity, it was the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century who amplified this criticism, leading to a ubiquitous attenuation of its practice throughout Europe. The medieval expression of pilgrimage, complete with indulgences and sacramental penance, was crippled by the quests of continental reformers like Luther and Calvin who posited a grace-based righteousness over against a salvifically meritorious expression of faith.

In 1536, Henry VIII, whose marital dilemmas placed him in questionable standing with Rome, set forth his *Injunctions* in which the clergy were forbidden to “allure the people by any enactments to the pilgrimages of any saints.” John Foxe records that hostility toward the practice of pilgrimage became a matter of identity for those protesting the corruptions of the Roman papacy, and as this attitude permeated England during the Reformation, there existed a great waning of the practice of pilgrimages to local shrines.

Yet during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a waxing of allegorical pilgrimage found resonance in the theology of English Puritanism.
Charles Hambrick-Stowe volunteers, “The principle metaphor running through Puritan Spirituality and devotional practice was the pilgrimage.” The Puritan recovery of an Augustinian understanding of pilgrimage allowed the motif not only to survive the Reformation, but also to thrive in works like John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Fueled by their own vulgar translation of the Scriptures, Puritans like Richard Baxter, John Owen, Jeremiah Burroughes, and John Flavel embraced biblical precedents like Abraham’s journey, Israel’s Exodus, and the sacred travels of the Magi, giving great exegetical and homiletical attention to the Pilgrim Psalms 120-134, Christ’s infant journey to Egypt, and New Testament passages like these.

Pilgrimage proved to be a theme too biblical to abandon, continually surfacing in Puritan sermons, letters, and books. When we read the journals of the Jamestown, Plymouth, and subsequent pilgrims, one senses that many of these New World sojourners did more than merely allegorize the biblical concept of pilgrimage; indeed, they incarnated it by physically traveling, as Abraham had, to a land they did not know.

In every age, pilgrimage has contributed to theological reflection. Post-Puritan references to pilgrimage appear throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. In his sermon *The Christian Pilgrim*, Jonathan Edwards describes the difficult path to heaven as a pilgrimage. “The way to heaven,” he writes, “is ascending; we must be content to travel up hill.”

In the twentieth century, Karl Barth, speaking to the redemptive implications of *o logos sarx egeneto* (“the Word made flesh,” John 1:14), tethers his discussion of Christ’s incarnation to the journey motif: “In being gracious to man in Jesus Christ,” Barth writes, “[God] also goes into the far country, into the evil society of this being which is not God and against God…. It is in this high humility that he speaks and acts as the God who reconciles the world to Himself.”

**Pilgrimage Today**

History has never witnessed a time in which the advancement of technology has so primed a generation for spiritual travel as ours. While it once took months to cross the Atlantic Ocean, now it takes only hours, and subsequently the twenty-first century has witnessed a renewed and enthusiastic interest in the practice of pilgrimage. Pilgrims who seek sacred destinations now have unprecedented opportunities to venture to places like Iona, Taizé, Skellig Michael, Mont St. Michelle, Mount Athos, Assisi, Jerusalem, and Rome. In this way, pilgrimage can serve as a unifying commonality among Christians of every denomination and tradition, a point of contact that fosters reconciliation and ecumenism.

Protestants can reclaim what they abandoned during the sixteenth-century Reformation by reforming their understanding of pilgrimage. For Protestants, pilgrimage can be practiced not as an expression of a medieval, works-based rendering of justification, but rather as a spiritual discipline
that reflects our journey to God, that gives great energy to our sanctification, and that engenders a spiritual vitality that is both Christo-centric and community-driven.

Pilgrimage does not assist in our justification; instead, this discipline is a tool that nurtures our sanctification. We do not travel to earn salvation, but rather to experience the God of our salvation in a physical and spiritual way.

We live in an era of entertainment and in a society saturated with instant gratification. Words like “patience,” “endurance,” and “commitment” sound strange to us. Slow modems are exchanged for high speed Internet access; fast food is not fast enough; and sermons are not short enough. The push of a button cooks our dinner, and the twist of a knob dries our clothes. In a society that struggles to discipline itself, the discipline of pilgrimage reminds us to slow down and take life one step at a time. It reminds us that life is an emotional, physical, and spiritual journey that requires upward and inward conditioning. It moves us from certainty to dependency, from confidence to brokenness, from assurance in ourselves to faith in God. It exposes us to different traditions that inform our thinking. Ours becomes a kaleidoscopic Christianity, and we see reality through sacred lenses, lenses that put flesh on faith and bones on Bibles.

Anyone can practice the discipline of pilgrimage. Richard Foster observes, “God intends the Disciplines of the spiritual life to be for ordinary human beings: people who have jobs, who care for children, who wash dishes and mow lawns.” Regardless of life stage, all Christians can benefit from this discipline. For children, it concretizes the journey to heaven in their minds by painting a visual and physical picture. For college students backpacking across Europe, it transforms a summer adventure into a spiritual revival. These days, technology allows us to trek through the world. More young people are traveling today than in any point in history, and whether it is to a mossy castle or a musty cathedral, the discipline of pilgrimage is a radical way of increasing our view of God.

What about those who cannot travel—the elderly, the poor, the hospitalized, or those with physical disabilities? Can they practice pilgrimage too? Yes. Pilgrimage is certainly not limited to location.
The Discipline of Christian Pilgrimage

us.”13 By setting the Lord always before us, we are constantly progressing in our understanding of his love. In fact, some of the greatest pilgrimages I have ever taken have been in the midnight moments of my life, the hospital moments when I opened up the Bible and traveled to Jericho, where the walls came tumbling down. As an armchair pilgrim, I went to Egypt and saw the Red Sea stand up for God’s people to march through. Because the presence of God extends everywhere, even unto the very ends of the earth, expensive trips to Europe and Asia are not required to practice this discipline. For some, a morning walk with a warm cup of coffee is enough. Others enjoy longer retreats to places of silence and isolation. The practice of pilgrimage can be appreciated by anyone, anywhere, anytime.

Pilgrimage is not a safe discipline, but it is certainly rewarding. It takes us out of our comfort zones and calls us away from a bloated Christianity where God cannot fit into our schedules. It calls us away from an anorexic Christianity where we become spiritually malnourished. It calls us away from a bulimic Christianity where we binge on Sunday only to purge up our beliefs on Monday. A regular diet of spiritual disciplines like pilgrimage can splash our dehydrated Christianity with fresh faith and gives us a greater hunger for the holy.

EMBARKING UPON A PILGRIMAGE

In her book Walking a Sacred Path, Lauren Artress suggests three stages for labyrinth walking, a discipline akin to pilgrimage whose principles apply as well to this sacred sojourn: purgation, illumination, and communion.14

Purgation is the stage of surrender—a divine detox. It is when we surrender to God what we have hoarded for ourselves: worry, anxiety, frustration, fear, doubt, and despair.

As you begin your pilgrimage, take your time. In our productive, accomplishment driven society, we are not accustomed to lingering. Like a midnight run to Walmart, you might feel the pressure to get in and out as quickly as possible. But resist rushing. Pilgrimage is about purpose, not pace.

Step-by-step, purge all the distractions—conflicts with colleagues, arguments with a spouse or teenager, money woes, fixations on entertainment, and so forth. Be specific. At each turn of the path, lay down individual sins or burdens before God. As C. S. Lewis understood, “We must lay before God what is in us, not what ought to be in us.”15 Reflect on the comfortable words of John that if we confess our sins to God, “he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

The next stage is illumination. As you progress, center your thoughts on a Bible verse, a promise in Scripture, or an attribute of God. Let each step of the journey be a miniature meditation. Ask God to expand your understanding of the focal idea and to increase your awareness of its depth.

The word “illumination” comes from the Latin lumen, meaning light. Unlike Eastern concepts of Bodhi, or enlightenment, that seek to transcend
the “fleshiness” of life (birth, suffering, hunger, and death), Christian illumination speaks to the desire to know Christ in the flesh, to walk beside him in his death, and to seek the fellowship of “sharing in his sufferings” (Philippians 3:10).

True pilgrimage leads to communion. While the destination of our travel is important, it is the journey that teaches us how to arrive. Tune your heart to worship. This is the exhale part of the breath, the climax of praise. The Psalmist declares, “Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise” (Psalm 100:4).

In 1514, Nicolaus Copernicus proposed a theory that would forever change the way astronomers perceived our solar system. Instead of the ancient, earth-centric interpretation, Copernicus offered a new, helio-centric theory. It was a revolutionary idea that the Earth revolved around the Sun. A similar shift in orientation is necessary in the human heart. In his book *Deliver Us from Me-Ville*, David Zimmerman explains how younger generations have developed a heightened sense of “Me.”16 He notes that we are a generation prone to pride, or (as he calls it) the vice of *superbia*. Pilgrimage animates the Copernican revolution that occurs within the heart of every Christian, the great transition from *me* to *He*. No longer are we at the center of the universe. Through God’s grace, we can now revolve around something bigger than ourselves, something holier and heavier. When Christ is at the center of our lives, only then can our lives be truly centered.

As you journey home, ask God to prepare you to reengage the world. Jesus never retreated into the wilderness merely for retreat’s sake. He refused to live as a holy hermit. Like Jesus, we, too, must retreat with the purpose to advance. Communion is the centrifugal phase when God commissions, equips, and sends us into society to preach and live out the gospel.

The fading paths of pilgrimage have all but disappeared from the landscape of evangelical history, but perhaps they can be repaved. Perhaps they can be redefined for modern generations who crave a deeper and more authentic spirituality. The discipline of pilgrimage awaits exploration by those who are willing to journey to its depths.

Ever since Christians were banished from the Garden of Eden, we have been trying to return. And God has paved a way. We travel in transition—imperfect, unbalanced, unfinished creatures longing for renewal and pulsing for perfection. We are aimed at another garden, a divine destination. But we are not there yet. The gravel has not turned to gold beneath our feet. Yet we press on, homeward bound, with paradise as our goal and Jesus our guide. A day is coming when faith will become sight and heaven will become home. The God who informs our thinking, reforms our attitudes, and transforms our lives travels with us from monastery to monastery, from pilgrimage site to site, from grace to glory, until at last we will be embraced by the everlasting arms of the Almighty.

This is the pilgrim way.17
NOTES

1 Clement of Rome, First Epistle, Letter of Clement to the Corinthians, 1.
8 Ibid., 239.
15 This idea is attributed to C. S. Lewis, in Walter Hooper, C. S. Lewis: A Complete Guide to His Life and Works (New York: HarperOne, 1998), 382.
16 David A. Zimmerman, Deliver Us From Me-Ville (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008).
17 Several paragraphs of this article are borrowed, in somewhat altered form, from my book Sacred Travels: Recovering the Ancient Practice of Pilgrimage (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), and articles “The Pilgrim Way: Discovering the Ancient Practice of Pilgrimage,” Conversations 5:2 (Fall 2007), 73-76, and “Labyrinth Walking: A Discipline for the Sole and the Soul,” Conversations 9:1 (Spring/Summer 2011), 72-75. These articles are available at www.conversationsjournal.com.

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Divine Hours Spent Hiking with God

BY CINDY CROSBY

As she began to pay attention—to truly look, listen, and see what was in front of her on her hikes—Cindy Crosby began learning the language of tallgrass prairie, the language of her new home. And she found, as Belden Lane puts it, “The wildest, most dangerous trails are always the ones within.”

If you want to know where you are going, it helps to know where you are. I moved to Chicago’s suburbs eighteen years ago, kicking and screaming. I am a child of the natural world. So many beautiful landscapes! What irony that the job my husband needed plunked us squarely in a place mostly comprised (so I thought) of corn?

I moped around the first few months, regretting the move, feeling suffocated by the suburbs. At least the city has some glamour to it. Living off the land in some off-the-grid location has allure. But the suburbs? I began to walk, and walk, and walk—hoping to perhaps keep walking right out of the place I had found myself. Then I discovered, just down the road, a one-hundred-acre restored tallgrass prairie.

LAUDS

What I registered in my mind as “old field” gradually came into focus. These were not the Midwestern weeds and grasses of my Indiana youth, but a signature of something different, something new. A landscape I had not seen before. As I began to pay attention—to truly look, listen, and see what was in front of me on my hikes—I began learning the language of tallgrass prairie, the language of my new home. And I found, as writer Belden Lane
puts it, “The wildest, most dangerous trails are always the ones within.”1

What’s so special about prairie? The tallgrass prairie is one of the most threatened ecosystems on earth. Twenty-two million or more acres of Illinois were once covered by tallgrass, almost two-thirds of the state. The invention of the John Deere plow, ironically, created just ninety miles west of my new home, quickly rang the death knell for tallgrass. The rich earth was turned over and planted in the corn and soybeans that stretch today from horizon to horizon.

The ghost of the prairie lingers on in the imaginations of those who drive Interstate 88 west of DeKalb, Illinois. The monotony of monoculture reigns. In winter, when the fields are bare, it is not difficult to look in any direction and see only a farmhouse or single tree punctuate the landscape. Use your imagination, and you’ll find that you can feel the isolation of a pioneer shuddering through the lonely winter in a small cabin moored in the tallgrass.

All that is left of the original Illinois prairies, about three thousand remnant acres, are mostly bits and pieces tucked into old, unmowed cemeteries, railroad right-of-ways, or the corners of fields where farmers turned their plows and couldn’t cultivate.

Today, eighteen years after I began those first tentative hikes, I and thousands of other volunteers work to restore the tallgrass prairie of Illinois, adding to those original preserved remnants. Why do we bother? The reasons are as varied as the volunteers themselves. Some enjoy socializing outdoors. Some care about environmental issues. Others come out for a day to pull tall, sweet white clover (Melilotus alba) or clear brush because they love the exercise outdoors. Some fall in love with the prairie.

I come to the prairie for all those reasons, plus another. The prairie is where I hike and feel closest to God. I find my most meaningful times of listening for that still small voice which is so often drowned out at my desk at work (where I hear about Jesus loudly and often, but not in the way you would hear it at church), or at home, with the clamor of cell phone and television. Even at Sunday morning services, I am often tuned in to the plight of the refugee and the homeless, distracted by the child drumming on the back of the pew, or chatting with a friend as we pass the peace—but not attending to the quiet in my soul. Not really listening.

I have belonged to enough churches, evangelical and mainline, and attended enough others, Catholic or Orthodox, to realize my personal struggle is not the fault of any particular congregation or denomination. I am wired for the outdoors, the cathedral of sky, the carpet of grasses and wildflowers, the hymns of birds and insects. While the weekly liturgical service helps me build a sturdy framework for each week ahead, it is not where I am going to commune much with the divine.

This is why I go to the prairie: to pay attention. As I do, I recalibrate my relationship with God. I find the journal of the prairie replete with messages
that I can listen to, attempt to decode, or ignore. The writer Annie Dillard notes that “beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there.”2 Sometimes I show up. Other times I get hooked on the energy of the tyranny of the urgent and days pass where I don’t. The astonishing things that happen in sky, grass, and stream go on. Whether I show up for them or not is my choice.

What I miss when I don’t go is another chapter in the story of the prairie. Each season, it unfolds something new for me to contemplate and consider. As I hike these days, I am mostly quiet. For years, I went to the prairie to journal. Now, I rarely pick up my pen. Rather than scribe and record, I put my paper and pen away, and walk, and walk, and walk. And in the walking, comes conversation. I am listener and sometimes petitioner, beggar, gratitude-giver, and angry child. The prairie absorbs it. I may stay away for a day or a week, but I am drawn back to it, again and again.

God is invisible, often silent. But the tallgrass is always there, waiting, evidence that I am not forgotten. Willoway Brook runs fast with snowmelt in the spring, with clouds of ebony jewelwing damselflies in the summer, and ladies tresses orchids in the fall.

I try to be there to be astonished. To bear witness. And to listen...just in case.

MATINS

It is early March. Waves of sandhill cranes are scribbling their way across the sky. It is a choreography of sorts, an aerial ballet. Weirdly prehistoric. These ungainly birds, standing up to four feet high at the top of their feathered heads, with wingspans that may reach more than seven feet across, look gawky on the ground. Yet, in the air, they take on energy and grace that stops my breath.

They are not holding their breath, however. The vocal cords of the sandhill cranes were said by John J. Audubon to stretch to five feet long, and he noted that their calls may reverberate for three miles. No wonder their eerie cries echo through my house, even with the windows closed! In the mashed down tallgrass of the late winter prairie, the wide open sky seems full of their racket.
Every spring, the sandhill cranes make their way north across my town in the Chicago suburbs. The cranes are moved by some inner compulsion, some signal that tells them go, GO, GO!!!!! Unlike the Canada geese, which now short-stop in our area all winter, these cranes do not fly in a straight V. Rather, they move determinedly in that V for a bit, then pause in midair. Suddenly, they swirl and turn, like the writing of a calligrapher who has had too much caffeine and lost control of her pen. To some on the ground, it may look like confusion, or chaos. But to me, it is all a joyful dance.

Today, I hike the Schulenberg Prairie at the Morton Arboretum in Lisle, Illinois, the first prairie I ever understood as such when I moved to the Chicago suburbs. At one hundred acres, it is a middling sort of prairie, not as large as some (Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie to the south will be more than twenty thousand acres), but bigger than the prairie patch I have cultivated in my small backyard. The sweep of blue over the Schulenberg offers virtual paper for the sky writing of the cranes.

The first wave of about thirty cranes has passed. There is a pause. The others are not far behind. Waves and waves—hundreds, then thousands—of sandhill cranes.

How do you describe the sandhill crane’s song to someone who has never heard it? When I was jolted by it for the first time one fall, I only knew it was something different, something unknown in the sky. The sound of the sandhill cranes is something like a purring cat. It is a thrumming of blood; sporadic, a vibration. If I can hear it from far below them on the ground, what must that racket sound like up in the swirling tornado of birds?

As I hike, looking up, a sun halo rainbows the sky, creating a backdrop of unending promise. Change, like the migration of the cranes, has its own predictable rhythms: joy, loss, happiness, grief. There is comfort in this. The cranes will return in November, on their way south.

I watch for the next wave, shielding my eyes against the sun.

PRIME

The cranes have barely passed through Illinois when it is time to burn the prairie. This prescribed fire mimics the natural cycle that people have forever changed; the lightning fires that once torched the tallgrass prairies and kept the trees from encroaching upon them and turning them to woodland are now suppressed by us. Native Americans, who also fired the prairies to drive wild game and entice it to feed upon the new growth, are no longer here to spark the tallgrass. So instead, I and about twenty-five others suit up in yellow slickers, pull on leather gloves and safety glasses, and with the team of prescribed burn members, go out to lay siege to the prairie.

The tallgrass goes up in a blink. Fire roars across the acres, consuming dried grasses, wildflower husks, and everything in its path. The flashes of light, the sound of the flames are intense, dramatic. And then it is over. How quickly what has taken months to grow is destroyed! Erased. Seemingly
lost. To the uninitiated, it is devastation of the worst sort. Those of us who help manage restoration know that the fires are necessary. Without them, the prairies would eventually vanish in Illinois.

This year, I burn my backyard prairie patch the day before Easter. Jesus is in the grave. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. I believe in resurrection, but today: not much. How can you, when everything is reduced to charred earth? What can a ground zero promise us about tomorrow?

Hiking the smoking landscape of the bigger Schulenberg Prairie after the burn, I feel the crunch of tiny mammal bones under my boots. Not everyone is quick enough to escape the flames. I see the detritus of items lost the previous year: a charred cell phone, a weeding tool left by a prairie volunteer, a bottle tossed out from a car on the road running adjacent.

The landscape is reduced to nothing but ashes and litter.

So it seems.

NONE

A warm front moves through, and overnight, my backyard garden is pushing up plants and blooms. Rain steadily pours down. The peonies, rhubarb-red and fringy, appear one morning. Lady’s mantle glistens with diamonds, showcasing each raindrop in its scalloped leaves. It is a transitional day.

I drive to the prairie. As I turn the corner to park, a sleight of hand has occurred. The charred, soupy mud is now a fuzz of emerald with ponds of rainwater standing in pools reflecting the now-blue sky. The black ash has warmed the ground. Hundreds of thousands of grass blades needle their way up from the ruins. Prairie dropseed hummocks, round bumps on the surface of the prairie, are furred with green. The tiny lime yucca-like leaves of rattlesnake master push up in tiny patches along the trails.

I walk, and I look, and I wonder. I gently touch the new leaves in their kaleidoscope of shapes, sizes, and colors. Welcome back. Welcome back. Welcome back.

During the fire, the growing points of the prairie perennials were safely tucked underground. The fires nipped a few emergents. But as the sun heats the charred ground, the warmth coaxes the prairie plants to grow again.

Each season in the tallgrass brings repetition, building on what was there the season before. Yet each season is a new beginning.

Along a craggy outcrop of gravel, I carefully hunt for what I know I have seen before. There! Tucked into the scorched rocks I find them: one, two, three early-blooming pasque flowers blossoming in one clump. Their pale, pale lavender petal-like sepals are almost invisible against the stones.

I fall to my knees in the mud. Somehow this trio of blooms has escaped the flames of a late spring burn. The pasque flower’s scientific name, *Pulsatilla patens*, refers to the open blooms’ pulsating in the wind.

Its common name, from Latin, means “Easter.”
VESPERs

A young black woman—a refugee from Sudan—reads the Sunday morning scriptures. I listen to her wrestle with the unfamiliar English, the odd rhythms of scriptural language. Yet her voice is confident. Reading Scripture in a second language may be difficult. But it is nothing compared to what she’s endured.

In an odd way, hearing the words through her reading refreshes the biblical narrative for me. Most of my childhood was spent listening to the Bible read by middle-aged white men. I have nothing against middle-aged white men—my husband of thirty-three years is one of them. But hearing the words from this teenager, who has journeyed so far to stand in front of us this morning and who has experienced suffering and loss that are beyond my imagining, helps me listen and pay attention again.

It reminds me of the power of these words. Her reading is a restoration of what is familiar, yet takes on new meaning. It is the juxtaposition of the old with something new, the past with the future.

“What are we made of? How did the universe begin?” At Fermilab, the nation’s “premier particle physic laboratory,” advanced particle accelerators help its seventeen hundred scientists and researchers “dig down to the smallest building blocks of matter” and “probe the farthest reaches of the universe.” The lab is just a few miles from my house. As an outpost of the Department of Energy, it is heavily protected by guards during times of national crisis, such as 9/11. Today, however the gates are open and I am free to hike their hundreds of acres of restored prairie, complete with some farm-like bison. I show the gate guard my driver’s license, and I am free to investigate the prairie trails.

The past and the future collide here, much like the particles in the accelerator ring once collided not far from my path. “Our vision is to solve the mysteries of matter, energy, space and time for the benefit of all,” reads their creed of faith. I admire the work these scientists do; I understand their drive to know. The greater drive I feel, however, is to make my peace with the unsolved mysteries, even while reaching for understanding.

The only sounds as I hike are the occasional burst of sandhill crane chatter overhead. Spring migration continues. A car whizzes by, and the
tentative sounds of a newly-emerged western chorus frog pierce the woods that limn the prairie.

The trails stretch to the horizon line, unbroken except by the occasional scrubby tree. And a large pile of...something.

I hike that way. The pile looks like the aftermath of a tornado that has swept through a wood. Tree after tree after tree, stacked like pixie sticks, taller than my head. Cut and piled—to be burned? Chipped for wood paths? I wonder. Why would anyone advocate this wholesale destruction?

I look closer. Ah! This particular mystery is solved. Ash trees.

In the past three years in northern Illinois, the ash trees have been decimated by a tiny pest: the emerald ash borer. The trees are weakened, and then die as the ash borer moves from street to street, from woodland to woodland, from state to state. At the arboretum where I work, more than two thousand trees on seventeen-hundred acres have been destroyed by the borer. Our Ash Collection? A memory. Only stumps remain of what once was were beautiful, stately trees, valued for their utility, their shade, and their beauty.

Ash is the wood of choice for professional baseball bats. Black ash trees were valued by the Ojibwe for baskets, providing material for works of beauty and utility. Along my street in a Chicago subdivision, where 1960s landscapers chose ash for their low cost and pretty shape, ash trees formed a leafy border shade. Almost eighty percent of our street trees have been removed in the past year.

A way of life as we know it is passing. Imagine a world without trees? I never could, until this.

Of course, the loss of a tree species is nothing new. A quarter of the Appalachian forests were once covered with American chestnuts in the early 1900s. When chestnut blight hopped, skipped, and jumped over the ocean, we lost more than two billion trees. Two billion!

Almost all but a handful of these economically important and beautiful trees were gone in the space of a few decades. No one could believe it was happening. Surely with our scientific know-how and smarts, we could stop the spread of the blight, right? But we were helpless.

We once planted rows of American elm trees in the same way. Every
small town in America still has its “Elm Street” — but where, oh where, are its elms? Gone. Because our main streets were lined with rows and rows of one kind of tree, when they began to fall to Dutch elm disease, we lost much of what made our communities beautiful and rich. Did we learn?

Rather than diversity, we chose a cookie-cutter way of moving forward. Ash trees replaced the elms in much of the Midwest. Ash are, or were, nice-looking, cheap, and fast-growing. Rather than choose the more costly path of diversity and planting many different types of trees, we chose to make every street look the same. It was cheaper and required less energy, work, and thought.

I hike the streets of my subdivision and mourn the result. The stumps along the sidewalk are like tombstones. Squirrels race across the street, looking for a place to put their dreys, the leafy nests where they raise their young. Birds move overhead in migration, confused.

No warblers sing from the two giant ash trees that once framed our driveway, giving us privacy from the neighbors. Our home feels naked, and all in the space of a year.

When we commit to the easy way — planting one kind of tree—we gamble. It is simpler, isn’t it, to know and promote only one tree for our landscape. We know what it will look like, its requirements and habits. But when we do, we lose the benefits of a vibrant, healthy landscape, teeming with different trees, plants, and their associated animals, birds, and insects.

As the emerald ash borers moved from tree to tree, they left hieroglyphics under the bark. Peel it back, and you will see the marks. This is known as the “gallery.” And indeed, it is artwork of a certain type. I imagine the message of the ash borer hieroglyphics is this: embrace diversity. Think about how to make life richer, not easier.

I hike, and I think, and I hike our streets some more. My parents never knew a world that had American chestnut trees. I have never known a world with elm-lined streets. My grandchildren will never know a world that has ash trees.

By refusing to acknowledge our need for diversity, what else will we lose?

COMPLINE

I return home from the baptism at my church Sunday morning to a thunderstorm, rattling my windowsills. The gentle trickle of the water sprinkled over an infant’s head seems tame compared to the first big crash-bang-wham deluge of the spring season. I open the window and lean against it, inhaling the cool, moist air, and listening to the rain.

But there is something else. Creak! Creak! Like the sound of a rusty door hinge. It is a western chorus frog, who has found his way to my tiny hand-dug backyard pond and is calling for a mate. He makes a lonely sound, with no response in the rain. But he doesn’t give up. After a while, as much as I
enjoy frogs, I find myself longing for an “off” switch. Even with the window shut, his voice is there—creakkkkkk—over and over in the background.

I have listened to these frogs and their counterparts, the spring peepers, as I hike the wetlands of the Chicago suburbs. But I have never had them in my pond before. My handkerchief of a yard is surrounded on all four sides by modern homes. Privacy is a desired commodity. In the spring, the commercial yard crews pull up outside my neighbors’ houses and spray, aerate, mow, core, and groom the blades of grass that form their tiny yards. Bushes are chopped and then contoured into poodle-like shapes. Ornamental yard trees are limbed to ensure good behavior. Fences surround almost all the yards but my own. KEEP OUT! CONFORM! The message is there, if unspoken.

I have chosen a different way. As I walk around my yard, I look at my small prairie patch, burgeoning with new growth. Common milkweed (Asclepias syrica), pulled from the surrounding yards, pops up in unexpected places. I leave it for the monarchs as they wing their way back to our prairies on their migration path from Mexico. Native milkweeds are their caterpillars’ sole source of food, and the only plants on which the monarch butterflies lay their eggs.

In one corner of my yard is a tiny pond. I dug through the clay and turf of my backyard to make it because I had learned that water is invitation to something bigger than me. It invites a loss of control. It speaks of a willingness to embrace mystery. The pond fills and dries, overflows and goes empty with the fickle nature of Illinois weather. In winter it is a small ice rink dusted with snow that shows me the passage of winter animals and birds.

On fine spring mornings, I find muddy footprints all around the pond and across the concrete patio: a raccoon, pausing to wash its supper; a fox, sometimes glimpsed as we are working in the yard, stopping for a drink; two ducks, flying in for a short swim.

In the summer, the flash and play of light on dragonfly wings enlivens my view from my hammock. “Won’t that water draw mosquitoes?” ask my Zika-virus frightened neighbors. Perhaps. But it also will bring the dragonflies that bring those mosquitoes in balance.

Through the ice and snow that covers the pond in winter, the dragonflies live as tiny beetle-like nymphs, ugly and ferocious. In May, they clamber out of the pond and begin to split their bodies into something new. Insect blood, hemolymph, pumps into their wings, which gradually unfurl and take on shape. They are inimitably fragile in this moment. Anything—hail, a passing bird, a flower petal falling at wrong moment—will obliterate them. Clinging to the leaves and plants around the pond, in the “teneral” stage, they slowly morph into something new, fragile. A bird could snatch them away in an instant. A wing could be damaged and irretrievably be malformed and broken, unable to be repaired. And yet, they lift off, more than not, in the miracle of flight. My backyard is evidence of this unseen mystery, year after year.
The tiny pond reminds me that if I prepare a place for mystery—a place where I give up control of what I want to see and, instead, see what comes—it will not always be pretty, like the dragonflies. Water is an invitation for change. Some of what emerges with that invitation will be broken. Some of it will become damaged along the way.

And yet.

I feel a hard-beating pulse; the blood moving through my veins. The pulse of spring, the pulse of the dragonfly wings unfurling. Of something ready to happen, of something new, ready to emerge. But I want to be open to what is different than I am; not complacent, comfortable in the company of the expected and the known. Let me risk.

I will be fragile. I will be broken. I will become strong. What will emerge? Come, Holy Spirit. Surprise me.

NOTES

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Meeting God (Again) in Spiritual Retreat

BY JEANIE MILEY

Spiritual retreat equips the serious seeker of God to find God in daily life. We experience retreat in many ways. We give up grading how it went by our standards of evaluation and trust that our efforts will produce the fruit we need, perhaps not from our perspective, but from God’s.

A friend asked, “You’re going on another retreat?” I nodded in the affirmative, trying not to feel guilty or self-indulgent. “Haven’t you retreated enough? When are you going to advance?”

It does not matter if I am going away on a retreat to fill my own cup or to facilitate a retreat for others, I return refreshed and restored. The power of retreat has been so important to me that I have come to understand that there is paradox in the experience: retreating is advancing.

Be still and know that I am God!

Psalm 46:10

I have facilitated many retreats for others, and I have attended many retreats as a pilgrim and participant. I have been in solitude and I have been in silence for eleven days on five different occasions with a group of people who were strangers to me at the beginning, but who became companions through the mystery of silence. I have been on retreats with much talking and activity, and I have been on retreats to learn how to be in the silence.

Often, a retreat is a chance to get away from routine and hear stimulating or inspirational speakers, get better acquainted with others in a relaxed environment, and participate in games and other forms of recreation. Some-
times, there is a campfire and perhaps a sing-along.

Those forms of retreats are still enjoyable and meaningful for me, but it was on a warm spring day at Wellspring, the retreat center sponsored by the Church of the Savior in Washington, DC, that a new dimension was added to the spiritual practice of retreat. There, gathered with about thirty other seekers, I experienced my first silent retreat for which the stated purpose was to meet God in the silence, and in those twenty-four hours, I found a resource and a practice for which I had been searching.

That particular retreat with its emphasis on the nurturing of the inward journey convinced me of the value and necessity of such retreats if I was going to be equipped for the demands and challenges of the outward journey. My religious heritage over-emphasized being busy for God and doing, and either neglected or minimized the practices of nourishing the kingdom within. That retreat at Wellspring introduced me to the contemplative life, and set me on a path that has been vital to my spiritual life and, in fact, to my general well-being.

That silent retreat introduced me to the practices that would make it more likely for me to be aware of God’s presence. The orientation of the retreat showed me that a person could grow into expecting that meeting God in the everyday ordinary could become a natural part of one’s everyday life.

Retreat provides the opportunity to draw apart, unplug, disconnect, and pause in order to advance in the personal quest to meet God and deepen the relationship with this Mystery. Taking the time to disengage from routine and participate in retreat provides inner resources that reprioritize the multiple quests of daily life.

Indeed, the idea of going away on a spiritual retreat is at odds with the American culture in which achieving, accomplishing, and acquiring are the rules of the road. We are formed in a culture that values results, instant gratification, and action. To ask ourselves to do the opposite—to practice ways of being in the world that ask us to slow down, take time for reflection, to do nothing but be—can be one of the most radically transforming and empowering things we can do. It can also cause discomfort for those whose days are shaped by the need to perform and produce, measure and count earnings and results, chart and graph progress.

I wish I had a lodging place in the desert where I could spend some time like a weary traveler. 

*Jeremiah 9:2 (NET)*

“I’m going on a silent retreat,” a person with whom I do spiritual direction told me recently. She was excited about a week she had reserved for herself in a solitary cabin on a retreat site in south Texas. “What do I need to do to prepare myself?”
Instantly, my memory took me back to my first solitary retreat in the Quiet House at Laity Lodge in the Hill Country of Texas, where the words of the verse quoted above from Jeremiah were inscribed over the doorway. That longing of Jeremiah’s for a place to be, to rest, to draw apart expressed precisely my feelings as I unloaded my car and prepared for a time when I needed to meet God in the silence. I was, in fact, hungry and thirsty for God’s presence.

I arrived tired and somewhat anxious about the experience of being disconnected from others, alone in a cabin out in what felt like a wilderness, but more, I was eager for what the days of solitude and silence might offer. I recalled pastor and theologian John Claypool’s words as I reflected on what it is that motivates a person to withdraw from responsibilities and daily life to be still and quiet, seeking to engage with the Spirit of God.

“I have been beckoned forward toward the Mystery and pushed from within by my pain,” Claypool once said to me, and perhaps that could be said about all who seek God.

Many things propel human beings to draw apart as a means of meeting God, and my experience is that it is in the silence that those “many things” become part of the agenda for a silent retreat. It is in the silence that we can hear the chatter in our own heads and sift and sort through the various pulls on our attentions and affections enough to finally be open more fully to the presence of the still, small voice of the Living God. In placing oneself in the atmosphere and attitude of meeting God, it is often possible to get a new perspective on old problems and to see with clearer eyes.

It is in the silence and solitude that the committee that meets in our heads can be calmed down, allowing the possibility of hearing the whispers of God’s grace.

On that day when my directee asked for direction for her retreat, I took a deep breath, praying to differentiate the need of this person before me and my own life experience. I knew the significance of this retreat and the sincerity of my directee’s quest to meet God.

With thoughts from my lifetime of retreats whirling in my memory, I wanted to keep to one of my rules of the spiritual path: keep it simple.
“Take an open mind and an open heart,” I told her. “If you want to state an intention of what you want from this time, do that, but don’t be so attached to your idea of what God wants to do and how God might meet you there that you miss what God is trying to do in you.”

“How should I plan my days?” she asked. “What should I take to read?”

Faced with five days of an open schedule, it is tempting to want to have a plan or a structure. After all, are we really worth anything if we are simply being? Such slaves to our schedules and our to-do lists, a blank calendar and a silent alarm clock can be anxiety-producing, but it can also be seen as a gift of pure grace.

“Take your journal and your Bible. Take a book if you want to read, but let the time unfold,” I told her. “Practice being present to your own inner nudgings. Trust God enough to let him guide this time.”

It is hard to slow down and just be when you have lived on the clock for so long, rushing to meet others’ needs, deadlines, demands. It feels awkward to be going at a fast clip year after year and then, suddenly, to have the blessed space and time to slow down to a more graceful, natural pace and really see and hear and absorb nature’s sounds and textures. It can be soothing, so that you feel you have finally found your own self again, or it can feel strange and even scary to be alone.

“I was so tired the first day that I just slept and walked and then slept some more,” my friend told me when she returned, and I reminded her that sometimes the most spiritual thing we can do is take a nap.

Americans are, after all, sleep deprived. We are generally so overly stimulated almost all of the time, either by billboards, media and computers, or television and telephones that when we are in a quiet place with no demands on our time or attention, we can finally relax and sleep.

On that first silent retreat at Wellspring, we were given the following prayer to take with us into the silence. From that first twenty-four hours of silence until today, this prayer has been part of my daily practice. I have surrendered many things into the hands and heart of God, including my stubborn will, complicated problems and hard decisions, relationships and writing projects, my deepest fears and the coming hours of a day or a retreat. This is the prayer that affirms my intention to be present to God with an open mind and an open heart.

Prayer of Abandonment

Father,
I abandon myself into your hands;
do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you:
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me,
and in all your creatures—
I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hands I commend my soul:
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into your hands without reserve,
and with boundless confidence,
for you are my Father.²

“Take this prayer with you into your retreat,” I told my friend. “Surrender the time into God’s hands. Allow yourself to be led by him. Relax into his presence.”

As I had done, my friend carefully wrote down the suggestions I gave her, but I reminded her that the Holy Spirit is the real director.

“By the way, take your knitting and your walking shoes,” I told my friend as she left our meeting place to travel to her small cottage at the retreat center.

Both meditative walking and the repetitive movements of needlepoint have come to be important components of a meaningful personal retreat for me. These and other physical activities somehow free the brain from its attachment to rational, logical ruminations and incessant planning, analyzing, and critiquing, and engage the more intuitive, creative, spontaneous part of the brain. Physical activity, too, can free the mind to accept the wisdom of the body, which always has much to say.

“Be aware of your first waking thoughts, too,” I told her, “for that is when the ego has not yet assumed its sentinel’s position. God can more easily speak in those tender waking moments when we are not so defended. And pay attention to your dreams.”

Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.

*James 4:8a*

Memories of the richness of my years of retreat came rushing back to me as I reflected on that session with this directee who is so much more than a directee. We are companions on the path of seeking God.

I could hardly wait to hear her report at our next session because I was confident that with her sincerity and openness to what I call “dancing with God,” she would have much to report.

While it is good to have a stated intention of meeting God on retreat, it is important to hold that intention with a light touch. One should not be overly anxious about when God might show up and how, and while an ecstatic experience might be wonderful, putting God to the test of how and when...
and what he might do boxes God in and reveals our own need to control.

You may not sense that anything is “happening” for you while you are on your retreat. You may even feel frustrated that it seems that nothing is happening, but what’s happening is not the point of a retreat.

If you have the desire to meet God in the time you have drawn apart to be with him, then trust that God knows that desire and relax into the rhythm of the time you have. God works best, it seems, at the unseen level, and you may not realize the benefit of the time you have spent until later and in daily life. You may get an insight or a revelation out of the blue weeks or even months later. The important thing is that you have made the effort to draw apart for the purpose of meeting God, and when you have done that, you can trust the process.

Solitude is a profound spiritual practice, so important that teachers in the worlds of spiritual formation and the contemplative life teach that the person who cannot be in solitude cannot fully be in community, and that those who cannot be in community cannot be in solitude. It seems that there is a correlation between being comfortable alone with God and yourself and being involved in a healthy way in a community.

At the same time I was being introduced to the practice of solitude, I also had the privilege of experiencing retreats with the adults in my church family. Drawing apart for a weekend together, listening to inspiring speakers, and sharing fun times on the Frio River or around a campfire gave us an opportunity to know each other in different settings. There were many other retreats I attended in which people gathered from far-away places to learn more about what it meant to be a follower of Christ within the context of contemporary society. I attended several retreats in which there was time for speakers to teach, time for the group members to process the lectures together in small groups, and time for rest and recreation in nature, and opportunities to experience the silence together.

Retreats that offer opportunities for drawing apart together and with the stated intention of spiritual growth build a sense of what it means to work together and support each other in the challenges of understanding and living the Christian life.

Poet Robert Browning said that “God uses us to help each other so, lending our minds out,”³ and on retreats such as these group retreats, I found that principle to be profoundly helpful in my own quest to under-
stand this mystery we call God. Hearing the wisdom and knowledge of teachers has the possibility of stretching our minds, even when we hear something that makes us uncomfortable. Even when we disagree, there is something important that happens when we sit in a small group and discuss the discomfort with others because the intention is not to prove who is right or wrong, but to discover how God might be working to show us something new.

In recent years I have heard about more churches and groups that attend family retreats, and I am sold on that idea. It is also possible to set aside time on family vacations to orient children toward the idea of meeting God.

and our hands, our shared quests for God, and the moments when God met us with his love.

For our group, the lessons in country western dance on a Saturday night went a long way in building community within our church family. God likes fun, you know.

In recent years I have heard about more churches and groups that attend family retreats, and I am sold on that idea. For families to draw apart from weekly schedules in which adults and children alike are constantly on the go for the stated purpose of being with other seekers of God has to be one of the great ideas of this season. It is invaluable for children of all ages to gather at a place where fun is provided in age-appropriate activities, to meet together in large groups for worship, and to see each other in relaxed settings, seeking a more meaningful relationship with God.

It is also possible to set aside time on family vacations to orient children toward the idea of meeting God. When our three daughters were young, we vacationed every summer in Lake City, Colorado. Away from the routine on a Sunday morning, I was nevertheless thinking about a series of family worship ideas for an article I was writing for our denomination’s magazine for parents of young children. My husband and I decided to practice what I was thinking about with our children and see if it worked, and so on a Sunday morning, we decided to take a Jeep trip into the high country and focus on how God reveals himself in nature. “Today as we hike and picnic,” we told our girls, “look for some way that God might speak to you in nature.”
Our four-year-old Amy had a small bucket with her, and throughout the day, she filled that bucket with small rocks and pebbles from the streams and walking paths. Her pursuit of the perfect stones was diligent and focused as she trudged up and down the mountain trails with us. That night after dinner, each of us was to share our stories of meeting God in nature with each other, and Amy was prepared with her bucket of stones. We thought she would have one thing to say about meeting God in the rocks, but one by one she pulled each little rock out and set it on the table, telling how she had experienced something about God’s love or his beauty in each one.

Finally, the other two girls became impatient, and all of us began to see that this could go on for a very long time because Amy had collected a lot of evidence that God was present with her on those mountain paths! Unfortunately, her big sisters began to giggle and, of course, that produced tears from Amy whose heart and intention was so sincere that all I could see was God manifesting himself in her purity of heart.

We tell that story often when we are together, now that the girls are adults, and we love to tell it to our children’s children now when we gather together in Lake City. We tell that story to remind ourselves of how God has been present to us as we have sought to meet him in our labor and our play, in nature and in great spiritual writings, in music and art, architecture and literature, and most of all, in each other.

Meeting God in retreat with the focused intention and stated purpose of nurturing the daily practice of the presence of God has a way of preparing our minds and hearts to be open to experiencing God in the ordinary, the mundane, and even the difficult and tragic. Spiritual retreat is a deeply focused experience that equips the serious seeker of God to find God in daily life.

We prepare for retreat by simply opening our minds and hearts to the desire to meet God. We experience the retreat in as many ways as there are people, I suppose, and we give up grading how it went by our standards of evaluation and simply trust that our efforts will produce the fruit that we need, perhaps not from our perspective, but from God’s.

Thomas Merton’s prayer helps me keep my perspective, whether I am on retreat or engaged in running my world.

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I do. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire, and I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow.
of death. I will not fear you, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.  

As I reflect back on the richness of spiritual retreats, I have to smile about how it is that sometimes a bucket of rocks and a rocky path have been the very gifts I have needed to free me to meet God again in a brand new way.

**NOTES**

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2 This is an interpretation by Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916) of Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. “This was the last prayer of our Master, our Beloved,” de Foucauld writes in introduction of the prayer. “And may it be not only that of our last moment, but also that of our every moment.” See Charles de Foucauld, Modern Spiritual Masters, edited by Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 104.


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**J E A N I E M I L E Y**

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Planning Mission Trips that Matter

BY CURT KRUSCHWITZ

Carelessly assembled short-term mission trips may jeopardize long-term ministry and create unhealthy dependencies. But when framed in the context of joining God’s mission and used to nurture spiritual growth, they can be of immense value to God’s kingdom.

When my father moved to Nigeria to serve as a missionary forty-five years ago, he went through painstaking preparation. The logistics of transatlantic travel were complicated. There were significant financial expenses. He soaked in as much information as he could during a two-month training experience. Perhaps nothing adequately prepared him, though, for saying goodbye to the world he knew and realizing that contact with those he loved would be very limited in the coming years.

Since then, the world has changed tremendously. When I was a twenty-year-old college student, it took me just a few months to raise funds to serve in Kenya with a team of students on a two-week short-term mission (STM) trip. You have probably seen teams like mine in an airport—sporting their gear in backpacks, wearing identical T-shirts, wading in clumps through security lines, and searching for their gate. Sponsoring short-term missions is the biggest trend to hit evangelical churches since Vacation Bible School, and it is growing exponentially. In 1989, an estimated 120,000 North Americans participated in STM trips. By 2003, that number grew to one million. In 2010, an estimated two to three million North Americans traveled internationally on STM trips. Never in history have so many people participated directly in global missions. In fact, Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow estimates that today’s church member in the United States has a 20-25% likelihood of going on a STM trip.¹ What started as a grassroots endeavor among church youth groups is becoming commonplace in North American churches.
My STM experience in Kenya sparked a sense of calling in my life that led me to move to Western Europe, where I served for several years as a missionary among refugees and asylum seekers. STM’s popularity was growing rapidly during that time, and I hosted about a dozen STM teams in Europe. These experiences with the STM movement were decidedly mixed. On the one hand, STM offered participants many opportunities for personal spiritual formation and for ministry. My own sense of God’s calling for my life was expanded after serving for a couple of weeks in Kenya. On top of that, the relationships built by one particular STM team I hosted in Europe were a significant catalyst for a couple of refugees growing deeper in their relationships with Jesus Christ. That team also helped me develop significant rapport with local social workers. On the other hand, some of the other STM teams were not as helpful as they thought. A few well-meaning teams and individuals, in fact, had agendas that could have jeopardized our long-term ministry.

In retrospect, it is not surprising that I had such mixed experiences with STM. For a practice that became so prevalent in churches in the 2000s, there was an astonishing void of scholarship examining the effects of the STM movement. Youth ministers and lay leaders were expected to take church groups on short-term mission trips, even though seminaries and denominations had provided virtually no training on short-term missions. Furthermore, while churches espoused anecdotal support for the STM trips, little scholarly research on their effectiveness was completed in the early years.

With the increasing clamor around STM in the mid-2000s, however, missiologists began to pay much more attention to the STM movement. They asked critical questions: Could the money spent on costly international airfare be better used if it were sent to local missionaries? Are untrained STM participants actually hurting local ministry through their lack of cultural sensitivity? Does STM focus too much on short-term fixes instead of long-term solutions? Does STM perpetuate patriarchal attitudes among Westerners used to a higher standard of living?

Calvin College sociologist Kurt Ver Beek published some of the first broad-scale, comprehensive research on STM that took into account how both participants and local hosts felt after an STM experience. Ver Beek interviewed 162 North Americans who helped with Christian relief efforts to rebuild Honduran homes after Hurricane Mitch ravished the country in 1998. He also conducted extensive interviews with local Hondurans about their opinions on the STM help. Ver Beek found that North Americans spent about $30,000 per rebuilt home in Honduras, while a local organization rebuilt homes for $2,000 each. Furthermore, the North American-built homes were no more helpful than the locally-built ones. Many of the Hondurans in the study admitted that it made more financial sense for the North Americans to send money to local Hondurans to rebuild homes. Still, the Hondu-
rans were reticent to discourage STM trips. When pressed to explain the value of STM teams, many of them did not remember the STM participants for the houses they built as much as the relationships they started. In fact, most of them valued the relationships they built with STM participants more than the houses they built. “The best thing was the friendship we had with the group,” said one Honduran woman, who named her daughter “Laura Michelle” after two of the North American STM participants.3

Other missiologists uncovered a host of critiques from local churches hosting STM teams. For instance, Edwin Zehner highlighted an East African church leader, who wished to remain anonymous, who preferred not to receive STM teams of American college students in his hometown. In this church leader’s experience, STM teams had unrealistic expectations for the trip. STM teams often focused on “bottom-line, results-oriented action,” he said. In addition, STM team members regularly harbored the notion “that a person who has traveled far to ‘provide help’ or ‘do mission(s)’ should be expected to do something substantial for the people he or she has come to serve.” This same church leader compared STM teams to special military forces who suppose “that they can engage the people instantly, accomplish their ‘mission’ and ‘pull out’ despite their lack of expertise in the foreign setting.”4 Caroline Baar found that indigenous church leaders in Rwanda and Ghana wished STM participants would focus less on large projects and instead invest time in building relationships with locals, learning about the host culture.5 Many local churches and missionaries around the world have agreed that STM teams are most helpful when they are less task-oriented and more focused on building relationships with locals and learning about God’s work in a specific location.

Steven Corbett and Brian Fikkert have identified further pitfalls of North American STM: perpetuating a system of paternalism, creating dependency, and stunting long-term growth within the host communities.6

Given this critical research on STM, it is not surprising that many missiologists and church leaders have asked, “Is STM worth it?” Yet, most continue to believe there is a place for STM because the spiritual formation for both participants and hosts as they take time to worship, serve, and learn together can be life-changing. Anthropologist Brian Howell sums up this positive perspective well:

We should not abandon international travel, nor should we be less generous with our resources. But if we would spend less time building walls, painting houses, or digging ditches, we could spend our time learning how the problems there are part of our problems here. These trips should serve to teach us how we are bound up together, in our economics, in our politics, and most importantly, in Christ.7
When congregations feel called to participate in STM, how do they serve responsibly? Several recent resources can help them plan better trips. James E. Plueddemann’s *Leading across Cultures: Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009) addresses the importance of cultural understanding amidst different culturally-based leadership models utilized across the globe, and provides insightful tips for developing healthy cross-cultural relationships. David A. Livermore’s *Serving with Eyes Wide Open: Doing Short-Term Missions with Cultural Intelligence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006) uncovers cultural misunderstandings that STM team members often unconsciously develop in their attitudes towards service, poverty, and sharing their faith. In *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2012 [2009]), Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert suggest helpful models for partnerships that avoid creating dependencies and that minimize paternalism. More recently, Corbett and Fikkert have published *Helping without Hurting in Short-Term Missions: Participants Guide [and Leaders Guide]* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), books with free online video content that guide STM teams to prepare for their experience.

These resources agree that the healthiest form of STM happens when participants develop relationships with local Christians, learning and worshiping and serving together. STM leaders must discern how they can best orient a trip towards these ends.


These resources agree that the healthiest form of STM happens when participants develop relationships with local Christians, learning and worshiping and serving together. According to David Livermore, “The single most important thing that differentiates the ‘good’ from the ‘bad’ short-term missions is the leadership’s objective.” STM leaders in churches and Christian organizations must discern how they can best orient a trip toward these ends.

At First Baptist Church, Waco, this discernment led us to reframe the traditional “mission trips” that we have led since the 1990s. In fact, we no longer call our out-of-town missional efforts “mission trips”; instead, we call them “Mission Formation Experiences” to more accurately describe the primary objective of these trips: spiritual formation and service together.

Throughout the Bible, kingdom service and spiritual growth often go hand-in-hand. Time after time, God uses engagement with the world as a
catalyst for spiritual growth among God’s people. Spiritual formation among God’s followers in the Bible does not happen in formal classroom settings. Instead, it happens as Israelites and Christ’s disciples are led to engage the world and to reflect on their real-life experiences in light of their faith. In other words, as God’s people engage their neighbors in God’s name, God uses those experiences to form them.

Consider the Israelites who were enslaved to the Egyptians for years. After Moses led them out of Egypt to Mt. Sinai, God points to their experience as oppressed outsiders to teach them how they should treat those on the margins: “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 22:21). God employs the people’s experience as sojourners in the wilderness to transform them. No longer is Israel to live as an inwardly focused clan; instead, God uses Israel’s experience to shape them more into the people God created them to be.

Jesus likewise uses his followers’ experiences as teaching points to form them more into his image. He sends out the seventy (or seventy-two) “ahead of him in pairs to every town and place he himself intended to go” with instructions for how to engage the people they encounter (Luke 10:1-16). When he disciples return, they are giddy with excitement over the power they had over demons. “Do not rejoice…that the spirits submit to you,” Jesus replies, “but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (10:20). In other words, Jesus uses their experiences to form them into the people God created them to be. This pattern runs throughout both the Old and New Testament: God’s followers are sent into the world, and through their experience engaging in God’s mission they develop a deeper understanding of God, the world, and their calling in it.

My research among STM participants at FBC Waco suggests this same pattern of spiritual formation through mission happens today. Participants often report spiritual growth and deeper understanding of their vocation from their participation in Mission Formation Experiences. To some extent, that results from how we set up the experiences: we shift the focus away from what we can do to help our hosts to how God can form us and our hosts as we serve God together. We are joining God’s mission around the world, trusting that as we serve in God’s name, God’s Spirit will form our hosts and our team more into God’s image.

Whereas the former mission trips at FBC Waco typically were one- or two-week experiences, the Mission Formation Experience is a commitment that lasts for months. Church leadership guides the team through three key phases of the experience: the pre-trip meeting, the nightly debriefing during the trip, and post-trip reflection gatherings. Each phase plays an important role in the formation experience. Like Livermore suggested, we have seen
that the way the trip leader leads the participants through these phases determines the success of the experience. As a result, we have identified several key things the trip leader can do before, during, and after the trip to create a team atmosphere conducive to healthy ministry and spiritual growth.

During the pre-trip phase, the leader’s main responsibility is to reframe the way participants think about the trip. So often, the obvious disparity in material wealth between the sending church and the hosts can unconsciously perpetuate patriarchal attitudes and a sense of superiority among the mission team. Therefore, it is vital for the trip leader to reframe the trip in the context of the missio Dei, the mission of God. We educate our team about the grand narrative in Scripture of God’s journey to rescue humanity and redeem God’s creation. Christopher J. H. Wright’s Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006) and Lesslie Newbigin’s A Walk through the Bible (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999) are great resources for this. We encourage participants to consider what God is already doing in our host community and ways God might be calling us to participate in that. In other words, we subtly shift the focus from what we can offer to how we can join what God is doing. More importantly and beyond the immediate purposes of the trip, we encourage participants to think about ways their lives can fit into God’s grand mission to rescue humanity and redeem the world. Thinking about the trip in terms of joining God’s work helps combat the inevitable “us” versus “them” sentiments that easily develop among participants.

During the cross-cultural experience itself, many team members report a heightened alertness to God’s activity in their lives. It makes sense: when else are they gathering to learn, pray, worship, and serve in a community for several days in a row?
Jesus highlights the interrelated roles of prayer, community, hospitality, and courage in witness. We also spend thirty minutes to an hour each evening processing our day’s experience as a group.

Over the years, these evening sessions have grown to become one of our team members’ favorite times of the day. Usually, just a question or two will suffice to get the conversation going: How did you see God working today? What did you learn about God, yourself, or humankind today? What is God calling you to do next? Participants articulate the ways they have seen God moving. We have found that this sort of contemplation is contagious! After a recent trip to Guatemala, many team members remarked how the nightly reflection times were catalysts for their spiritual growth. One of them said, “I love hearing stories about what God’s doing, because then it makes me think...maybe God’s trying to show me something, too, and maybe I should look for something like that.” As participants hear from their peers how God is working in their lives and in the lives of our hosts, it inspires them to consider how God may be working in their own lives.

Because participants process their experiences through their study in Luke 10 each day, the Mission Formation Experience becomes a “lab” where participants learn new ways to study Scripture and look for its truth in their daily lives. Some participants have reported that the daily reflection times were catalysts for a deeper pattern on Bible reading, prayer, and service when they returned home.

After the cross-cultural experience concludes, we offer opportunities for team members to gather together again back in Waco. In these meetings, we remember ways that we saw God work during our experience, we celebrate what God has done, and we spur one another to integrate that experience into our daily lives. To each post-trip meeting participants bring a picture that reminds them of how God worked, bring something that reminds them of a spiritual lesson they learned, or bring a written statement about how their life fits into God’s mission here at home. As participants remember how God worked in their lives during the Mission Formation Experience, they often consider how that same God invites them to serve, study, and follow God in their hometown. It is our hope that the travel portion of the Mission Formation Experience will become a vehicle for on-going spiritual growth and theological reflection at home.

A hundred years ago, it would have been hard to fathom that North America alone would send out two to three million Christians on short-term mission trips every year. Critics have rightly identified some of the challenges that come from unexamined participation in the movement. Cultural insensitivity, paternalism, and an insistence on results-oriented tasks can do more harm than good. At the same time, missiologists have observed the spiritual
formation and ministry that occurs for both participants and hosts in STM.

A short-term mission trip has the potential to be of enormous value. Like a fire that can be used to destroy or to refine, it must be treated with great caution and care. Short-term mission trips hastily thrown together have the potential to jeopardize long-term ministry and create dependencies. But when they are framed within the context of joining God’s mission and utilized to nurture the growth that happens when individuals leave their comfort zones, they can be of immense value to God’s kingdom. It is up to us to make sure they are done well.

NOTES
5 Ibid., 511.
6 See especially chapter 2, “‘Do Unto Others’—Counting the Costs of STMs,” in Corbett and Fikkert, Helping without Hurting in Short-Term Missions, 29-44.
8 Ibid., 61.
11 Ibid., 72, 98.
While on the long Emmaus road,
weighed down with grief and sorrow’s load,
in hopes their dreams would be restored
the two disciples met the Lord.

Like them, we journey to refresh
ourselves in spirit, heart, and flesh,
to recreate ourselves, and find
renewal of our soul and mind.

On pilgrimage we set apart—
for worship, prayer, repose of heart—
a holy place, and there pursue
a faith restored, a love made new.

To distant lands our path may go
to share with those who need to know
the love of Jesus Christ, who came
to pardon those who trust his name.

In all our travel, let us see
the journey as a jubilee;
our hopes refreshed, our dreams restored,
for as we go, we take the Lord.
While on the Long Emmaus Road

DAVID W. MUSIC  TRADITIONAL

1. While on the long Emmaus road, weighed down with grief and sorrow's load, in hopes their dreams would be restored.

2. Like them, we journey to refresh ourselves in spirit, heart, and flesh, to recreate ourselves and pray.

3. On pilgrimage we set apart for worship, repose of heart in a holy place and there pursue.

4. To distant lands our path may go to share with those who need to know the love of Jesus Christ, who as a jubilee; our hopes refreshed, our dreams restored.

5. In all our travel, let us see the journey.
stored the two disciples met the Lord.
find renewal of our soul and mind.
sue a faith restored, a love made new.
came to pardon those who trust his name.
stored, for as we go, we take the Lord.
Worship Service
BY ERIC L. MATHIS

GATHERING
FOR THE WORSHIP OF GOD

Meditation

Not only does God in Christ take people as they are: He takes them in order to transform them into what He wants them to be. Along with the indigenizing principle which makes his faith a place to feel at home, the Christian inherits the pilgrim principle, which whispers to him that he has no abiding city and warns him that to be faithful to Christ will put him out of step with his society; for that society never existed, in East or West, ancient time or modern, which could absorb the word of Christ painlessly into its system.”

Andrew F. Walls

Greeting

Call to Worship: Psalm 122 (A Song of Ascent)

I was glad when they said unto me,
“Let us go to the house of the Lord!”

Our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem.

Jerusalem – built as a city
that is bound firmly together.

To it the tribes go up,
the tribes of the Lord,
As was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the Lord.

For there the thrones of judgment were set up,
the thrones of the house of David.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
“May they prosper who love you.
Peace be within your walls,
and security within your towers.”
For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say,  
“Peace be within you.”

**For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,**
I will seek your good.

**Prayer of Expectation**

O Lord, we long for the day
when our feet will stand
within the gates of the New Jerusalem.

Until then, as we journey toward home,
guide and protect your Church.

Bind us in unity,
clothe us in truth,
and keep us in peace.

We pray in the strong name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

**Hymn of Praise**

“The God of Abraham Praise”

The God of Abraham praise,
who reigns enthroned above,
the ancient of eternal days,
the God of love!

The Lord, the great I AM,
by earth and heaven confessed—
we bow before his holy name
forever blest.

He by his name has sworn,
on this we shall depend,
and, as on eagles’ wings upborne,
to heaven ascend.

There we shall see his face;
his power we shall adore,
and sing the wonders of his grace
forevermore.

The goodly land I see,
with peace and plenty blest,
a land of sacred liberty
and endless rest.

There milk and honey flow,
and oil and wine abound;
the tree of life forever grows
with mercy crowned.
There rules the Lord our King,
   the Lord our Righteousness,
victorious over death and sin,
   the Prince of Peace.
On Zion’s sacred height
   his kingdom he maintains,
and glorious with his saints in light
   forever reigns.

Triumphant hosts on high
   give thanks to God and sing,
and “Holy, holy, holy” cry,
   “Almighty King!”
Hail, Abraham’s God and ours!
   One mighty hymn we raise.
All power and majesty be yours
   and endless praise!

*Thomas Olivers (c. 1770), alt.; based on a Hebrew doxology
Tune: LEONI

## CONFESSION

### Prayer of Confession

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against your holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is nothing good in us. O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare those, O God, who confess their faults. Restore those who are penitent; according to your promises declared unto all in Christ Jesus our Lord. Grant that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life; to the glory of your name. Amen.²

### Assurance of Pardon

We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

*1 John 1:4-7*
Silent Reflection

In one sense we are always traveling, and traveling as if we did not know where we were going.

In another sense we have already arrived.

We cannot arrive at the perfect possession of God in this life, and that is why we are traveling and in darkness. But we already possess him by grace, and therefore, in that sense, we have arrived and are dwelling in the light.

But oh! How far have I to go to find You in Whom I have already arrived!

*Thomas Merton*

Hymn of Rest

“*I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say*”

I heard the voice of Jesus say,  
“Come unto me and rest;
lay down, O weary one, lay down
your head upon my breast.”

I came to Jesus as I was,
so weary, worn, and sad;
I found in him a resting place,
and he has made me glad.

I heard the voice of Jesus say,  
“Behold, I freely give
the living water, thirsty one;
stoop down and drink and live.”

I came to Jesus, and I drank
of that life-giving stream;
my thirst was quenched, my soul revived,
and now I live in him.

I heard the voice of Jesus say,  
“I am this dark world’s light:
look unto me, your morn shall rise,
and all your day be bright.”

I looked to Jesus, and I found
in him my star, my sun;
and in that light of life I’ll walk
till traveling days are done.

*Horatius Bonar* (1846), alt.

*Tune: KINGSFOLD*
**The First Reading: Genesis 12:1-9**

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s people.  
Thanks be to God.


Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since
these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.” Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

The Gospel of the Savior.

Praise to You, Lord Christ.

Hymn of Journey

“When on the Long Emmaus Road”

While on the long Emmaus road,
weighed down with grief and sorrow’s load,
in hopes their dreams would be restored
the two disciples met the Lord.

Like them, we journey to refresh
ourselves in spirit, heart, and flesh,
to recreate ourselves, and find
renewal of our soul and mind.

On pilgrimage we set apart—
for worship, prayer, repose of heart—
a holy place, and there pursue
a faith restored, a love made new.
To distant lands our path may go
to share with those who need to know
the love of Jesus Christ, who came
to pardon those who trust his name.

In all our travel, let us see
the journey as a jubilee;
our hopes refreshed, our dreams restored,
for as we go, we take the Lord.

David W. Music (2016)
Suggested Tunes: O WALY WALY or PUER NOBIS
(See pp. 55-57 of this volume.)

The Third Reading: Hebrews 11:13-16

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s people.
Thanks be to God.

Sermon

RESPONSE

Hymn of Guidance

“Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah”

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,
pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but thou art mighty—
hold me with thy powerful hand;
Bread of heaven, Bread of heaven,
feed me till I want no more,
feed me till I want no more.
Open now the crystal fountain, 
whence the healing stream doth flow; 
let the fire and cloudy pillar 
lead me all my journey through; 
Strong Deliverer, Strong Deliverer, 
be thou still my strength and shield, 
be thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan, 
bid my anxious fears subside; 
bear me through the swelling current, 
land me safe on Canaan’s side; 
songs of praises, songs of praises 
I will ever give to thee, 
I will ever give to thee.

*William Williams (1745); trans. William Williams and Peter Williams (1771), alt.*

Music: CWM RHONDDA

*Prayers of the People: based on Psalm 121 (A Song of Ascent)*

No matter where we are, where we are going, or what we are doing, 
we know that we find our help in you, our Lord.

**In our coming and going, draw near to us and stay.**

You are the creator and sustainer of all that has been made and will be made. And yet, the immensity of creation does not distract you from caring personally for every creature in it.

**In our coming and going, draw near to us and stay.**

You do not daydream or become weary in that care. We thank you that you not only watch over us with diligence but that you guide us so that we do not fall, so that we do not even stumble.

**In our coming and going, draw near to us and stay.**

Whether we are awake or asleep, you are there, sheltering and protecting us from all that would hurt us. We know that you watch over all our living; you have in the past, and we know that you are now.

**In our coming and going, draw near to us and stay.**

Your promise holds for the future and for eternity, and we praise and thank you for that.

**In our coming and going, draw near to us and stay. Amen.**
Offering

A musical setting of the Shaker song “Simple Gifts” is appropriate.

‘Tis the gift to be simple, ‘tis the gift to be free,
‘tis the gift to come down where we ought to be;
and when we find ourselves in the place just right,
‘twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gained,
to bow and to bend we shan’t be ashamed;
to turn, turn will be our delight
till by turning, turning we come ‘round right.

Joseph Bracket (1797-1882)
Tune: SIMPLE GIFTS

Doxology

Benediction

As you journey, may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.

Bless the Lord.
The Lord’s name be praised.

Hymn of Travel

“Rejoice, Ye Pure in Heart”

Rejoice, ye pure in heart,
rejoice, give thanks and sing
beneath the standard of your God,
the cross of Christ your King.
Rejoice, rejoice,
rejoice, give thanks, and sing.

Bright youth and snow-crowned age,
strong men and maidens fair,
raise high your free, exultant song,
God’s wondrous praise declare.
Rejoice, rejoice,
rejoice, give thanks, and sing.
Yes, on through life’s long path,
still singing as ye go;
from youth to age, by night and day,
in gladness and in woe.
Rejoice, rejoice,
rejoice, give thanks, and sing.

At last the march shall end;
the weary ones shall rest;
the pilgrims find their heavenly home,
Jerusalem the blest.
Rejoice, rejoice,
rejoice, give thanks, and sing.

Praise God, who reigns on high,
the Lord whom we adore,
the Father, Son, and Spirit blest,
one God forevermore.
Rejoice, rejoice,
rejoice, give thanks, and sing.

Edward H. Plumptre (1865), alt.
Tune: MARION

NOTES

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Henry Ossawa Tanner portrays the holy family's clandestine travel to escape persecution, an event that resonated with the artist's personal story.

The Night Escape

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

The story of the holy family’s night flight into Egypt to escape King Herod’s assassins (Matthew 2:13-18) invites artists to paint a scene shrouded in darkness and imbued with moral symbolism. Henry Ossawa Tanner achieves this foreboding mood in Flight into Egypt. It depicts the artist’s favorite biblical story, according to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, where the painting has been located since 2001.1

Tanner was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where his father, Benjamin Tanner, was a prominent minister. His mother, Sarah Miller, had been a slave before she escaped via the Underground Railway. Tanner became an accomplished illustrator and photographer before concentrating on painting. He studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts from 1880 to 1882 under Thomas Eakins, then moved to Atlanta where he opened a photography gallery and taught drawing at Clark University for a few years. He was the first African American artist to emigrate to France, where he studied at the Académie Julian in 1891 before he settled in the country permanently in 1894. He later traveled to Rome and, when he became fascinated with biblical narratives, to Palestine.2

Tanner’s early paintings reflect the academic style and realism of his teacher, Thomas Eakins. The works after the mid-1890s have a more personal style based on a layering effect of thick paint with complex glazes and characteristic blueish tonalities (“Tanner blues”).

The artist gravitated toward biblical subjects, even though these were quite rare in American culture in the nineteenth century. In Flight into Egypt, Tanner employs his knowledge of Palestinian architecture to recreate the mystery and danger of the holy family’s clandestine escape. The event must have resonated with Tanner’s personal experience, for in this depiction we can discern his “sensitivity to issues of personal freedom, escape from persecution, and migrations of African-Americans from the South to the North.”3

NOTES
3 Tanner, Flight into Egypt, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Collection Record.
Using his signature palette of muted greens and blues, Henry Ossawa Tanner imagines the intimate evening walks that the disciples enjoyed with Christ.
Henry Ossawa Tanner’s father, Benjamin Tanner (1835-1923), was a prominent minister and later a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. “It is not by accident that I have chosen to be a religious painter,” the artist reflected in an interview published in 1913.1

Bishop Tanner, in his *Theological Lectures* (1894), had highlighted the story of Jesus’ return to Bethany by night.2 This inspired his son’s painting and personal interpretation of Mark 11:11, “Then [Jesus] entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.” The town of Bethany was a hub of Jesus’ ministry: there a woman anointed him with costly ointment (Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; cf. John 12:1-3), he raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-44), and he blessed the disciples before ascending into heaven (Luke 24:50-51).

In *Jesus and His Disciples on Their Way to Bethany*, Tanner depicts Christ and four disciples walking along a road in the moonlight. According to the artist, “I have taken the tradition that Christ never spent a night in Jerusalem, but at the close of day went to Bethany.”3 Tanner depicts the night scene with his signature muted green and blue palette. Several compositional details of the landscape and clothing are based on insights he gained on trips to the Middle East. For instance, the group is met by a goat herder who bows his head in reverence to Christ. This is an invention of the artist and a departure from the Gospel narrative.

Tanner’s earlier paintings in the 1890s were black genre scenes that demonstrated his concern for presenting a dignified image of African Americans. Race became an issue as he often was categorized as a “negro artist.” As art historian Jennifer Harper rightly notes, by painting religious scenes, Tanner made race less of an issue and his works were judged without as many biases.4

NOTES
2 Ibid., 81, see note 26.
3 Ibid., 81.
4 Ibid., 84.
Due to copyright restrictions, this image is only available in the print version of *Christian Reflection*.

Lelio Orsi imagines how Christ teaches his disciples, then and now, on the path they travel together.

Gospel travel narratives highlight theological points, not geographical details. But artists must depict the visual particulars of roads, wells, farms, villages, and characters in a story. The two disciples’ walking the short road from Jerusalem to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) is a case in point.

In the Lukan narrative, the disciples are talking about the events of Jesus’ passion when the “unrecognized” Jesus joins them and asks what they are discussing. Presuming he is the “only stranger outside Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days” (Luke 24:18), they take the opportunity to inform him. But the disciples, in fact, do not understand what has happened: they are unsure whether Jesus was “the one to redeem Israel” (24:21), why his tomb is empty, and how he can be alive as the angels told the women at the tomb. Jesus replies, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” (24:25-26). As Jesus walks with them, he explains the scriptures about himself, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets” (24:27).

How can an artist portray men walking on a road with details to direct viewers to this specific narrative? Lelio Orsi, from Reggio Emilia, Italy, depicts three men in pilgrim’s clothing, pushed to the foreground as is typical in Mannerist compositions. Nothing about Christ, the figure who gestures with his left hand as if in conversation, is exceptional. This is an established visual tradition by the sixteenth century. The figure on the left wrings his hands in agitation as he listens; both disciples appear to be despondent because they cannot reconcile their hope that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel with their fear that he is now dead.¹ The disciples’ swords are prominently displayed on their belts. A goldfinch, symbolic of Christ’s passion, can be seen in the foreground.²

We too imagine traveling with Christ—perhaps in a visual image that guides our thoughts and actions—as artists have done in paint for centuries.

NOTES
On Pilgrimage in Italy

BY ERIC HOWELL

Unlike a vacation escape from life, pilgrimage is a journey nearer to the heart of God and deeper into life with God. The hope of all pilgrimage is realized when we have renewed eyes to be happily surprised by God’s mysterious presence in all times and places, even at home.

If home in the simplest sense, as Joseph Wood Krutch once said, is “the place where one opens one’s eyes without surprise,” then the decision to travel to faraway places requires a willingness to be surprised. Every experienced traveler has a story of the unexpected, whether it occasioned pleasure or pain. Those usually make the best stories.

Yet there is a different kind of travel possible for those who dare leave home. To travel as a Christian to faraway places of spiritual pilgrimage is a desire for even more than surprise. It is a willingness to be not only surprised, but transformed. Christian pilgrimage is born of yearning for spiritual renewal; the pilgrim seeks a different kind of travel experience than the one merely logged by photos and souvenirs. In his Asian notes, Thomas Merton observes, “There is another side of Kanchenjunga and of every mountain—the side that has never been turned into postcards. That is the only side worth seeing.”

I believe two spiritually oriented, travel-related maxims. The first is, when you travel well, the most important journey is the one that goes inward, no matter the outward destination. Diana Kappel-Smith makes a wonderful observation in Desert Time when she writes, “Plants and animals change as one goes up the mountain, and so apparently, do people.” The second maxim I believe is this: you do not have to go anywhere to find ground for the soul’s journey toward God. The quest for meaningful spirituality is not out there or over there somewhere. Mindfulness of God’s faithful presence is found everywhere by the Holy Spirit’s ministry of comfort and
conviction. “Sit in your cell as in paradise,” begins the Brief Rule that guides the Camaldolese monks. 4

Spiritual wisdom has long insisted on stability and perseverance. Even with that wisdom in mind, this essay is about actually going somewhere far away, traveling as a Christian pilgrim to distant places experienced as sacred ground. This truth also is passed down through the ages from our Christian heritage: there’s nothing like actually being there. From the earliest centuries, Christianity has a vibrant tradition of pilgrimage to holy sites associated with the life of Jesus, the apostles, and the saints. Generations of Christians have experienced sacred places as windows to the divine.

There’s nothing like being there! What follows is an itinerary for a pilgrimage through Italy. I offer it for two primary reasons: as an actual recommendation for a pilgrimage to Italy drawn from my experience there on sabbatical for seven weeks, and, more broadly, as a template for pilgrimage to any part of the world. The rhythm of travelling well translates to different locations. On a pilgrimage trip there should be scheduled time plus free time; activity plus empty space. There is “Hurry-up let’s go. We don’t want to miss this!” and there is “Slow down and breathe. Take a book or a journal and find a tree to sit under for a while.” And a larger rhythm arcs through the whole trip: movement from city to town to countryside, from fast to slow, from mind to heart to soul, from walking off the soles of your shoes to kneeling in reverence in a quiet, holy place.

PREPARE WELL: STUDY AND ORIENTATION

The footprint for a spiritual journey is much bigger than the actual days on the trip. In addition to the typical preparations necessary for international travel, we want to be intentional about our readiness for the experience. So here is a suggested reading list. Yes, this is homework! And it is worth the effort. This preparation will help us be more fully immersed in the wonder of the places we visit.

Robert M. Edsel’s Saving Italy: The Race to Rescue a Nation’s Treasures from the Nazis (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013) is a gripping suspense story that orients us to the significance, and fragility, of the Christian art and architectural heritage we will encounter. Edsel’s earlier work was the basis of the popular movie Monuments Men (2014).

We will be traveling in the footsteps of Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226). Reading either Elizabeth Goudge’s My God and My All: The Life of St. Francis (New York: Plough Publishing House, 2015 [1959]) or St. Bonaventure’s The Life of St. Francis of Assisi, translated by E. Gurney Salter (1904), will prepare us to more fully appreciate him and the places he lived. Lucinda Vardey’s Travelling with the Saints in Italy: Contemporary Pilgrimages on Ancient Paths (Mahwah, NJ: Hidden Spring, 2005) introduces other Christian figures, some well-known and others more obscure, and recommends specific destinations to visit as we are grateful for and learn from their faithful lives.
Our pilgrimage will include some remarkable churches. They are too much to absorb in one viewing, but reading Ross King’s *Brunelleschi’s Dome: How a Renaissance Genius Reinvented Architecture* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000) and Margaret Visser’s *The Geometry of Love: Space, Time, Meaning, and Mystery in an Ordinary Church* (New York: North Point Press, 2000) can help us decode their inspiring architecture.

**TRAVEL WELL: 10 DAYS ON PILGRIMAGE**

Imagine with me now a pilgrimage in central Italy. Lodging in all cities will be in the guest quarters of active monasteries. Italy has a fine tradition of simple, affordable monastic hospitality.

*Day 1, Saturday: Depart from home for Rome*

We arrive in Rome mid-morning. Even with jet lag, this gives us time to visit the Pantheon, the best-preserved ancient building in Rome, and in continuous service as a church since the seventh century. From the Pantheon we will join in the Roman tradition of the evening *passeggiata*, a lovely stroll from around Piazza Navona, past Trevi Fountain, to the Spanish Steps. This will be a relaxed day and an early bedtime will have us ready for the next morning.

*Day 2, Sunday: Arrive Rome*

In the morning we will visit Saint Agnes Outside the Walls, the subject of Margaret Visser’s book on our reading list. In this seventh-century church we will be immersed in a visual tour through church history and revere one of our ancient martyrs at her burial place. From St. Agnes it is a short distance to the Catacomb of Pricilla. On our tour we will pass through the burial place of popes, martyrs, and ordinary Christians from early Rome.

The afternoon is available for rest or for other interests. Options include the Roman Coliseum and Forum, the Borghese Gardens and Art Gallery, St. John Lateran Basilica, or St. Paul Outside the Walls Basilica.

*Day 4, Tuesday, Rome*

It’s Vatican Day! Early in the morning we will queue in line for the Vatican Museum, one of the most renowned art collections in the world. From there we will gain access to the Sistine Chapel and then to St. Peter’s Cathedral.

After lunch, the afternoon is again flexible. Options include the same for Monday, plus the Scavi Tour of the necropolis under the Cathedral, including a view of the site of St. Peter’s burial.

*Day 5, Wednesday, Florence*

Early in the morning we will catch the train for Florence, the birthplace of the Renaissance. After a ninety-minute train ride, we will arrive in one of the most beautiful cities in the world! On the schedule for today are visits to Santa Maria Novella Basilica, San Marco Monastery,
the Baptistery of St. John, and the Duomo (or cathedral church). A climb to the top of the dome of the cathedral church is an option for those with strong legs!

Both evenings in Florence at 6:00 p.m. we will join the Monastic Community of Jerusalem for vespers in the tenth-century Badia Fiorentina abbey. The Jerusalem community’s vocation is “to provide an oasis of prayer, silence, and peace in the ‘desert’ of modern cities.”

**Day 6, Thursday, Florence**

Museum Day! We will visit the Uffizi Gallery, one of the world’s top art museums, and the Accademia Gallery, home to Michelangelo’s statue of David.

We will watch the sunset from the front steps of San Miniato al Monte, the oldest church in Florence. From this perch, the whole city will lay below us as we prepare for the final leg of our journey.

**Days 7-9, Friday-Sunday, Assisi**

Early Friday morning we depart for Assisi, the City of Peace. Over the next three days the pace slows as we visit many of the sites most closely associated with Saint Francis and Saint Clare, including San Damiano, the Portiuncula, and the crypt where Francis is buried. At the Basilica of Santa Clara, the Cross of Francis presides over a small prayer chapel. We will visit the “Lest We Forget” exhibition at the Memorial Museum, which tells the Assisi story of hiding three hundred Jews from the Nazis during World War II. Time for prayer and reflection will be shared throughout our stay in Assisi, and on Saturday there will be an opportunity for a half-day side trip to Montecasale and La Verna, two tranquil and important Franciscan pilgrimage sites. We will worship Sunday morning at San Francesco Basilica in Assisi.

Sunday afternoon we depart for one final night in Rome.

**Day 10, Monday: Depart Rome for home**

This will conclude the organized, group trip. If you wish to extend your stay in Italy, here are four suggested options for a few days or up to a week. Any of these options would be a wonderful end to your trip.

**Option 1**: Depart from Assisi and head north for Ravenna and Venice by bus or train. Fly home from Venice. Why would you go? To see Ravenna’s glittering Byzantine mosaics and Venice’s San Marco Basilica and unique beauty.

**Option 2**: Depart from Assisi and go northwest to Milan and Lake Como by train. Fly home from Milan. Why go? To visit Milan Cathedral, see Da Vinci’s Last Supper, and enjoy Lake Como’s stunning shores.

**Option 3**: Depart from Assisi and drive west for a Tuscan hill town. Fly home from Florence or Rome. Why go? Visit Cortona, Montepulciano, Siena, San Gimignano, or so on – take your pick and live la dolce vita!

RETURN WELL: REFLECTION AND REORIENTATION

Unlike a vacation escape from life, pilgrimage is a journey nearer to the heart of God and deeper into life with God. When you have returned from your physical trip, the pilgrimage continues as the artwork, architecture, conversation, the places and spaces stay with you long after you are back home. They are now a part of you in ways you will unpack for years to come. The hope of all pilgrimage is realized when we have renewed eyes to be happily surprised by God’s mysterious presence in all times and places, even at home.

NOTES

1 Joseph Wood Krutch, The Desert Year (Iowa City IA: University of Iowa Press, 2010 [1951]), 171.
3 Diana Kappel-Smith, Desert Time: A Journey through the American Southwest (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1994), 139.

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Travels have come in amazing variety for the author as a missionary kid, short-term mission trip participant, and agricultural missionary. In his journalism career, however, he travels even further from home—away from the insulated comfort of church culture and into lands of cosmopolitan secularism.

A friend once told me that those who have grown up overseas are most at ease enroute. She herself was a transplant working to do ministry in a foreign land. And I am the child of Baptist missionaries to Bolivia. I found her observation held up.

I do not know what it is about sitting as a passenger on a plane, or bus, or car. Maybe it is the twin feeling that I am simultaneously at rest and yet accomplishing a great feat: getting somewhere. The concept in C. S. Lewis’s *The Great Divorce* where we will all be traveling closer and closer to God, even in the life to come, brings a homely comfort.

Travel itself is a many-splendored thing. There is the trip you take to the grocery store. The trip you take to visit friends. The trip you take to get out of the house. The trip you take to tour an exotic locale. The trip you take to a holy place. The trip you take to help people in need. And the trip you take to move somewhere else entirely—perhaps because creditors will not stop calling, or hopefully because God is calling you about something in particular.

It is the last kind of trip—to move somewhere else entirely—that I know more intimately than many. Army brats, ambassador kids, missionaries—anyone who has moved around a lot can tell you that the last-listed travel holds a different feel than any other. In all the other kinds of trips, the actual, final destination is home.
In a cosmic sense, all of our travels aim for home, but home defined as the place where we are meant to live. There is the sense of this at the end of T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.\(^1\)

G. K. Chesterton (who didn’t exactly have a fondness of Eliot’s poetry—he was in favor of the world ending with a bang) played with the same concept in the opening pages of his book *Orthodoxy*. He envisioned a man setting off on an adventure and accidentally returning home, only to treat everything in his homeland as new and unknown.\(^2\)

In those two philosophical examples, the move is still to a place that is new, even if we have a shadow of it in our hearts.

With all respect to John Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress* is not much of a pilgrimage, since very rarely will pilgrims actually pack up and move their family to stay on the grounds of a holy site. Not every Muslim lives in Mecca, nor every Catholic in the Vatican.

My travels as a missionary kid took me to new places. From Equatorial Guinea, to different places around Bolivia, and finally to Texas, a quasi-Republic embedded in the United States. I loved my MK life, and I am immensely grateful for it. I grew up without roots, and that bothered me for a time, but what I discovered is that roots can grow once you stop moving, regardless of early uprooting. And even if I did not have cultural roots tied to a geography, I had anchors in God’s kingdom, and those have proved much more valuable.

I grew up sitting on crude benches in a circle under the open air with only a natural gas lamp hissing at the night and lighting the congregation as we sang tragically tuned songs about God’s promises. I prayed in church buildings, still with crude benches, as the pastor belted out prayers amplified a thousand times by crackling speakers. And my friends and I received our baptisms in everything from brick baptisteries to rivers, lakes, and oceans. Whatever the cultural divide, we believed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the loving, creator God, the renewing Holy Spirit, and Christ’s promised return.

Honestly, my life as a missionary kid may have been less about traveling than many other’s lives. Salesmen, military, and executives’ families probably had to move around a lot more than I did. We just had generally longer plane rides when we went back to see family. My life as a missionary kid was not about always traveling. It was about living in a culture that was
not native to my parents. My parents may have felt as though they were on a very long trip. I was just growing up.

Eventually I returned to the United States and attended Baylor University. That is when I did a bit more travel, the kind with a return destination. I majored in journalism and took a trip to Kenya where I wrote about the visits of a social work team composed of college students. I took a short-term mission trip back to Bolivia with a supporting church in Texas. And I helped my father pioneer his borehole well-drilling technique in Kenya and Ethiopia.

Backing up a bit: my father served as an agricultural missionary. He saw the faces of starving Ethiopians on television during the famines of the 1980s, and he and my mom dedicated their lives to go help people in such need. The Southern Baptist Convention at the time was specifically christening missionaries with backgrounds in agriculture, which my father had. (My parents joined the SBC before leaving it and becoming independently affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas later in life.) My dad wanted to teach good agricultural technique to farmers in developing countries, but plants need water, as do people.

In Bolivia in particular, rural farmers did not have reliable water supplies. Villages generally had an open, hand-dug well or bar ditch infested with frogs or leeches. Children would walk for miles to gather this water rather than go to school so that the family could rid themselves and their livestock of thirst, clean their clothes, wash themselves, water plants, and, in sum, live. In response, my dad invented a way to manually drill borehole water wells with a rig costing about $300, and to make well pumps for about $100. My father taught farmers how to make the wells and maintain the pumps themselves, all using locally available materials. Water For All International, the nonprofit my father started, has drilled more than three thousand wells in more than a dozen countries around the world.³

So I went with my dad to Ethiopia and Kenya over a summer to see if the well drilling would work there. It did. After college, I joined a group to re-learn the well drilling, and I pioneered the technique in Togo on my own. It worked there too.

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I grew up without roots, and that bothered me for a time, but I discovered roots can grow once you stop moving. And even if I did not have cultural roots tied to a geography, I had anchors in God’s kingdom, and those proved much more valuable.
In the end, unfortunately, the most I learned was probably how to drill wells in different places, not much else. This is one of the hazards for me personally in mission-based travel, travel where you have a job to complete: everything else can get blocked out. I am a task-focused sort of person, and though I made a few friends along the way, much of what I remember from the travels is working hard around a mud puddle surrounded by pipes. Mud puddles and pipes generally look the same in Ethiopia, Bolivia, and Kenya, with minor differences. Kenya did have redder mud. The most valuable moments of such travel were in the down times: trapped in a hut with fellow workers during a storm, eating and joking with the family I was helping to get a well, or sharing stories on the road from one place to another.

It has been years since I went on any other such humanitarian expedition. Now I have settled into a stage of life in the United States where I am able to financially support others who are overseas. On my own accord, however, I travel now further from home than I did in my youth. I have ventured further away from the insulated comfort of church culture to lands of cosmopolitan secularism. Journalism, the career I chose, is not renowned for its piety. And Austin, Texas, has the reputation of the trendy, cynical cities of the northwest, a hole in the Bible belt, even if there are excellent congregations of believers in its midst.

In some ways, the present leg of my earthly journey reflects the kind of challenge that many might face on trips abroad, and which more and more U.S. residents are facing themselves: the challenge of pluralism. What does one do when one encounters a cultural practice or way of life which conflicts with one’s core principles? How does one relate to outsiders, or relate to insiders when someone is an outsider?

My approach for quick trips is simple, even if difficult at times: treat people respectfully, lovingly ask questions, present one’s own viewpoint, and move forward on common ground. When this amounts to a single conversation on a plane or a bus or over coffee, it feels manageable, but it is harder to do this every day in interaction with neighbors, coworkers, and friends. It is a challenge to hold tight for a conflict-averse, people-pleaser
like myself. Yet it is a struggle that the church of pilgrim-travelers cannot avoid. Not while we are enroute to our own pilgrimage home.

NOTES
3 For more information about the Water for All International project “training families to drill their own low cost water wells,” see www.waterforallinternational.org (accessed June 17, 2016).

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Resources for Short-Term Missions

BY TYLER GARRARD

Can a short-term mission trip be meaningful for participants and hosts, and be fun? The books reviewed here address that tension. They consider the how and the why of trips, explore issues with cross-cultural travel, and suggest structural changes to the common approach toward short-term missions.

The youth group in the church I grew up in looked forward to the mission trip every year. On the wall in the game room there was a mural map of the United States with pictures highlighting the places the church had been—Boston, Missoula, and Seattle to name a few. Every fourth year the group went on a “big” trip, once to Denmark and another time to Greece. I do not remember what work was done on these trips, but probably it was some version of backyard Bible clubs or evangelism. I remember being told that on the last night of the trip everyone would cry because of how close they had gotten. By the time I was able to go on mission trips, a new youth minister had come and while the locations were not as exotic, the model was basically the same. A trip each year, some type of service project, some type of vacation.

At the church where I serve now, I am in the process of planning a short-term mission for the summer. I feel acutely the tension between the trip being meaningful, both for those who go and those we are with while there, and the trip being fun. The four books reviewed here help to address that tension. They consider the how and the why of trips, explore issues with cross-cultural travel, and suggest structural changes to the common approach toward short-term missions.
Mission Trips That Matter: Embodied Faith for the Sake of the World by Don C. Richter (Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 2008, 176 pp., $17.00) is the more theologically orientated of the four. As with his previous book (with Dorothy Bass), Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens (2002), there are not a lot of “practical” suggestions in Mission Trips that Matter. The book is designed as a guide for incorporating the whole body into the experience of travel and short-term missions. It is an invitation to “move beyond checklists to ponder what deeper wisdom the Spirit is whispering as we get our immunization shots, pack our bag, fill our water bottles, put on our walking shoes, strap on our cameras, and pull out our maps” (19).

In the first part of the book Richter considers different reasons why churches or groups go on mission trips. He offers space for reflection by group leaders regarding their own gifts and limits as leaders. Preparing to go on a trip can be an endless checking-off of lists; Richter provides questions that help leaders move beyond those checklists, from the how of the trip to the why of the trip. (But never fear: a later chapter in Part III, “Resources for the Road,” does include a list of workbooks and guides that would be helpful in preparing a trip.) Here Richter sees missions as a form of pilgrimage and wonders how such a perspective might combat some of the more troubling reasons churches choose to go.

Part II is the heart of the book, reflecting on how the whole body might be considered within the context of a mission trip. Chapters entitled “Attentive Eyes,” “Attuned Ears,” “Sturdy Backs,” “Beautiful Feet,” “Open Hands,” “Courageous Lips,” and “Conspiring Noses” lead readers to ask, how does being aware of our body help us to be more present and open to the people we are serving? Richter wants pilgrims not only to think theologically about the why of their trip, but to connect that why with the physical realities of the places they will go. In that sense, maybe it is a very practical book after all.

Helping without Hurting in Short-Term Missions: Leader’s Guide by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, with Katie Casselberry (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014, 256 pp., $14.99), is the most practically useful of the four books. As the title suggests, this book is a guide for those preparing to lead a short-term mission (STM) trip. The first part of the Leader’s Guide offers a framework for how to think about short-term missions and the second part suggests how to implement it.

Because STM trips usually intend to help persons in need, the framework suggested by Corbett and Fikkert centers on a particular understanding of poverty and how its alleviation relates to the lives of participants before and after the trip. They argue that since “poverty alleviation is a long-term process of reconciliation, not a momentary provision of material
good, a standalone, two-week STM trip cannot significantly and directly contribute to poverty alleviation” (22). Therefore, the model STM trip is one that “supports the work God is already doing in a community, that avoids hurting those we are trying to help, and that leads to transformative engagement” (23). They have in mind the transformation of trip participants through long-term engagement with the problems of poverty. Just as poverty is not something that can be alleviated in a two-week trip, genuine transformation takes time. Corbett and Fikkert propose an STM model that begins preparing participants long before the departure date for the trip and continues to guide their transformation after the return.

To implement such a trip is no easy task, but the second half of Helping without Hurting is dedicated to outlining how to do it. The first thing Corbett and Fikkert recommend is to carefully build partnerships. They encourage groups to work through an intermediary organization that already has an established relationship with a community in need. Other practical suggestions focus on the language used to describe the trip (Chapter 6), building the team (Chapter 7), training the team members (Chapter 8), and being prepared to follow-up with them after the trip (Chapter 9).

Also included in the book is a copy of the companion volume, the Participant’s Guide, and free online access to a series of eight videos to spark group discussions. It should be noted that Helping without Hurting assumes at least some familiarity with Corbett and Fikkert’s earlier work, When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor…and Yourself, new edition (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2012 [2009], 288 pp., $15.99). That being said, while I was only familiar with that book in name, I still found Helping without Hurting to be useful and thought provoking. Its brief explanation of some of the issues confronting short-term missions and suggestion that trips should emphasize the participants’ presence with over their helping the hosts provide some valuable guidelines to STM leaders.

Short-Term Mission: An Ethnography of Christian Travel Narrative and Experience by Brian M. Howell (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2012, 256 pp., $24.00) is the “scientific” book of this group. Howell is an anthropologist at Wheaton College and the subtitle for his book is a clear sign that it is a little more work to get through than the above two books. It is well written, but does require more sustained attention. Whereas Mission Trips that Matter and Helping without Hurting go well together as books to read when preparing for a trip, Howell’s Short-Term Mission would be most useful in an interlude between trips for a group restructuring their approach to mission or as part of a larger investigation into short-term missions.

Howell’s intent is to show how we create the stories we tell about the trips we take, how we use those stories to understand the trips, and how
they become so important in participants’ religious lives. After outlining his own theoretical approach, he provides his own definition of “short-term mission.” In defining this complicated term, he discusses both pilgrimage and tourism, but in the end he says STM is a “unique phenomenon referencing a unique social encounter” (40). Howell explores the development of short-term missions (involving laypeople, especially youth, on a trip roughly the length of a vacation) from its earlier roots in missions (featuring ordained adults on life-long projects). It is in this shift that Howell sees the language emerging that shapes the narratives we tell today.

The third part of the book is the study of Howell’s trip with Central Wheaton Church to the Dominican Republic. He looks at how the wider American evangelical culture influenced team members’ interpretations of their experiences during the trip and coming home. Chapter titles “Pour Out Your Soul” and “Of Course You Always Go Close to God on a Mission Trip” reflect the kinds of narratives trip-goers tell of these stages, respectively. In the final part of the book, Howell discusses the narratives within the context of theology and missions as a way of thinking about how STMs might be restructured through “cultural change.”

Of the four authors, Howell is the one who most clearly advocates for significant change in the approach to short-term missions. The other authors offer practical suggestions—such as changing language in regard to the trip, building relationships with hosts, and focusing on the why of a trip— but Howell thinks “it is not enough to change our language (culture is not only rhetoric) and it is not enough to change our practices” (198). Instead, he calls for structural and institutional change. Short-term missions should continue but those sending STM teams must “consider reform in light of the larger economic, institutional and cultural context of their travel” (198).

Effective Engagement in Short-Term Missions: Doing It Right! Evangelical Missiological Society Series, 16, edited by Robert J. Priest (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2012 [2008], 655 pp., $16.99), is by far the longest book reviewed here. I am not sure if the exclamation point at the end of the title signals that doing it right is exciting, or is just a little forced cheerfulness for the weighty tome the contributors have produced. This anthology offers a variety of authors: six are women, two are Chinese, one is Korean, and one is Peruvian. Nevertheless, the writers mostly come from a small selection of Chicago-area schools with distinctive theological commitments (Wheaton, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and Moody Bible Institute), and so the range of perspectives is limited in other ways.

The book is structured in six sections. The first part explores the move from long-term missions to short-term. The second and third parts examine relationships with the “other” and formation of partnerships. The fourth
Traveling Well

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deals with specialized trips (for example, for medical practitioners or business persons), and the fifth, which is “alone worth the price of the book,” according to Priest, looks at legal issues in regard to missions. The last section focuses on the impact of short-term missions on participants. This book is probably best used as a companion to one of the other books. For instance if you are a leader working through Helping without Hurting, it might be good to read Miriam Adeney’s essay “The Myth of Blank Slate” or C. M. Brown’s “Friendship Is Forever: Congregation to Congregation Relationships.” If you are reading Mission Trips that Matter, perhaps read Richard Slimbach’s “The Mindful Missioner” to fill out your approach to a trip.

In the Church Dogmatics Karl Barth notes that some missionaries see themselves as people with flashlights going into the dark places of the world and shining the light. What they do not realize, he says, is that the light is already there. That is an important insight to remember when we become anxious about planning the perfect mission, either short- or long-term, to bear witness to the light.

Each of the books reviewed here expresses a desire to do a short-term mission trip right, to have a trip that matters, or (at least) to have a trip that does no harm. Yet they illustrate that despite the best of intentions, it is not always possible to do a trip “right,” to say how a trip matters or to whom it matters, and to do no harm. Part of the reason for this is cultural and structural, part is the difficulty of breaking poor habits, and part is because trips involve working with and for people with complex motives and personal limitations.

So, we should be realistic. Reading these books will not make our trip totally successful in any of those ways, but they can help us as we plan, lead, or participate in a short-term mission trip. They will not show us how to do everything right, but can make us aware of the light that surrounds and sustains us, wherever we go, even to the very ends of the earth.
Toward a Theology of Pilgrimage

BY JOHN GATTA

Drawing on personal experience, three writers insist that every Christian is called to travel the pilgrim’s way—at least in the inward, metaphoric sense of pursuing a life-project extending toward eternity—and that most would benefit from pursuing some form of physical peregrination.

From the first, it seems, Christians were known as followers of “the Way” (Acts 9:2), an identification with the road to truth that likewise carries existential resonance in Taoism and other faith traditions. Arguably, then, the idea of wayfaring and pilgrimage lies at the very heart of Christian spirituality. By the sixteenth century, Luther and other Protestant reformers expressed scorn for all physical expressions of pilgrimage, which they had reason to associate with the abuses of medieval superstition and relic worship. Yet the practice of pilgrimage has since won renewed favor from Christians of diverse denominational stripes, as well as from largely secular seekers. Why so? When the World Wide Web enables us to be virtually anywhere or everywhere at once, why should anyone care to travel by foot to some distant site reputed to be sacred? Why, for that matter, should we regard any place as especially holy, following the destruction of Jerusalem’s Second Temple in AD 70? Why should physical geography or place-oriented pilgrimage matter at all, in the face of Jesus’ assurance that God’s presence is no longer to be understood as localized but instead discovered in the believer’s own heart and wherever two or three faithful are gathered?

Three fairly recent books devoted to this topic begin to tell us why. All three share a forceful, richly elaborated insistence that every Christian is called to travel the pilgrim’s way—at least in the inward, metaphoric sense
of pursuing a life-project extending toward eternity—and that most Chris-
tians would also derive substantial benefit from pursuing some form of
physical peregrination. That pilgrimage in Christian tradition has to do
not merely or mainly with walking a spatial pathway but with a way of life
had long been, of course, a prominent theme in literary works by writers
such as Dante (1265-1321) and John Bunyan (1628-1688). But it is signaled
explicitly in the title of Jim Forest’s volume, The Road to Emmaus: Pilgrimage
as a Way of Life (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007, 190 pp., $16.00) as well as in N. T. Wright’s The Way of the Lord: Christian Pilgrimage Today, new
It is a pervasive supposition, too, throughout Charles Foster’s musings in

Extolling the potentially life-changing benefits of physical pilgrimage,
all three of the writers in question draw heavily on their personal experience.
For example, each reflects at length on his own visits to Israel—including
his impression of holy sites in Jerusalem, the pre-eminent destination of
Jewish pilgrimage past and present. Foster’s account dwells especially on
the peculiar challenges and assets of present-day encounters with that
ancient city, which Wright describes as standing above all others by way
of illustrating a “way into the presence of the living God” (56). Foster pro-
vides a colorful abundance of testimony from latter-day pilgrims not only
to Jerusalem but to various other sites as well, while he invokes the guiding
witness of noteworthy pilgrims from the past—including the nineteenth-
century Russian author of The Way of the Pilgrim. Forest also calls to mind
personal ties with celebrated companions of his along the way such as
Dorothy Day (1897-1980), Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (b. 1926), and
Thomas Merton (1915-1968). Forest’s tour of pilgrim destinations takes us
not only to inspiring “thin places” but also to revelatory “dark places”
around the world, including the Anne Frank house in Amsterdam and
a purgative passage through his own state of chronic illness.

N. T. Wright’s commentary is informed by his reputation as one of the
world’s leading biblical scholars and theologians. But in The Way of the Lord
he wears this learning lightly, masterfully combining his knowledge of bib-
lical themes and contexts with heartfelt reflection on the import of his own
travels both in space and in spirit. So Wright’s account of pilgrimage, like
the other two accounts, is grounded in personal experience. He begins by
pointing out that despite his having been born in central Northumberland,
with a grandfather who had been Archdeacon of the legendary pilgrim’s
island of Lindisfarne, it took him some time to overcome the “non-consider-
ation of pilgrimage” (2) enforced by his religious upbringing. Yet in his
maturity, he came to regard “pilgrimage to holy places, though neither
necessary nor sufficient for Christian living,” as offering to many “a time
of real growth and depth in discipleship,” a “stimulus and an invitation to
Rooted in the evangelical charge to seek encounter with God, the practice of pilgrimage, physically enacted, qualifies for N. T. Wright “as a metaphor, even a sacrament, for and of the pilgrim’s progress through the present life to the life that is to come.”

Granted, too, something of tourism is always apt to color pilgrim initiatives. Yet the essential motive and spirit of one’s travel, rather than movement per se, is what seems to matter most.

I believe the peripatetic impulse, expressed physically in the pilgrim’s way, thus stands for Christians in a complementary rather than oppositional relation to our elemental “homing instinct” — that is, our willingness to set
down roots somewhere on earth, to acknowledge our place in a particular community, to honor the ideal of finding ultimately our true rest and home in God. Following Wallace Stegner (1909-1993), author and farmer-prophet Wendell Berry thus extols the enduring contributions to American society of settler-migrants he calls “stickers,” those willing to stay somewhere long enough to put down roots among the place’s people and land, in contrast to “boomers,” those individualist opportunists who remain always on the move. And while it is true that Henry Thoreau (1817-1862), as cited by Foster, was an inveterate walker who “saw movement as inextricably connected to the business of being human” (57), Thoreau did most of his walking within the bounds of his natal village of Concord, Massachusetts. “I have travelled much in Concord,” he famously declared. In the same vein, contemporary author Annie Dillard titled her celebrated account of homebound journeying and spiritual exploration Pilgrim at Tinker Creek.

By virtue of recognizing the paradoxical character of pilgrimage, N. T. Wright’s treatment of the matter strikes me as particularly discerning. Wright affirms that physical journeying and the veneration of holy sites can indeed nurture our faith—so long as we understand such practices to be signposts or icons of the deeper reality we seek. Otherwise they are apt to become distractions or delusions. He reminds us that “pilgrimage, therefore, remains ambiguous for the Christian,” so that “those who imagine that going on a geographical pilgrimage will automatically make them holy, or bring them closer to God, are doomed to disappointment or worse” (15). Moreover, “it is not we, ultimately, who are on a journey for God in the face of Jesus. It is God who is on a journey looking for us” (16).

This aptly nuanced perspective on pilgrimage is reflected throughout the course of Wright’s treatment, which weaves together personal narrative and meditation with historicized commentary so as to illuminate unseen dimensions of the biblically-charged landscapes this book traverses. Thus recalling that “Pilgrimage is a way of prayer,” Wright leads the reader in progressive chapters from Paul’s Damascus through other pathways running to the Jordan, the Wilderness, Galilee, Jerusalem, the Mount of Transfiguration—and finally with Christ to the Cross and from the Tomb. Even those of us who have yet to set foot in the Holy Land, along with those of us never privileged to have been there in the company of the historical Jesus—which is to say, all of us—can gain invaluable understanding of such pilgrimage from Wright’s book.

In diverse but substantial ways, Forest’s The Road to Emmaus and Foster’s The Sacred Journey also enlarge the reader’s sense of what journeying through biblical lands might mean for Christians—both inwardly, as problematically disentangled from tourism, and solidly on the ground. Foster also provides a brief but useful chapter devoted to the question of negotiating the pilgrim’s “Arrival and Return.”
But a jet-assisted excursion to Israel is scarcely the only “way” by which present-day pilgrims might seek bodily expression of their journeying in faith. Where else to walk, then, and for what purpose? The volumes by Forest and Forster suggest a wealth of possibilities. The Road to Santiago in Spain, traversed by pilgrims for centuries, remains a classic option, one that has lately attracted renewed attention from young people around the world. Hiking the Appalachian Trail, despite its lack of a geographic telos with sacred repute, is understood to be a life-changing spiritual (if not always religious) praxis for many in present-day America. Jim Forest’s book is noteworthy for the range of sites he identifies and describes as pilgrim destinations—not all of them picturesque, rural, or steeped in either biblical or saintly memory. So his list includes a number of unconventional sites—not just Emmaus, Iona, and Canterbury, but also Memphis, Louisville, Amsterdam, and a former synagogue in Alkmaar, Netherlands. In an especially moving chapter titled “The Pilgrimage of Illness,” Forest describes his own anguishing journey toward accepting and praying through a health crisis that required him to begin kidney dialysis.

And given our nature and evolutionary history, we still need on occasion to make our way in the world mindfully by foot. For the health of both soul and body we must still walk, must walk often and with gratitude, even or especially in this age of supersonic transport and instantaneous communication. Such a call to the pedestrian is sounded repeatedly in all three books. Buddhists, too, have long appreciated the spiritual benefits of “walking meditation”; and for most of us, if we are reasonably able-bodied, attentive walking remains the least costly and most accessible form of physical pilgrimage available. Ours is indeed a “God who walks,” as Foster reminds us. Extending the principle metaphorically, we might envision our life-project as a long sojourn not only toward God but with this God who walks. Walking that way, we have reason to welcome every new and surprising turn in the path, to perceive all that surrounds our trail illumined by grace.
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