

United Reformed Church

Sabbatical Report

Nigel Uden

January – March 2023

I PURPOSE

Increasingly, I became aware of the need deliberately to prepare for retirement, which will occur in August 2025. Earlier in my ministry, I spent all but a decade in a role that included pastoral care of retired ministers. It taught me that our inhabiting of the retirement years is often only as good as our preparing for them.

In recent years, as retirement approached, I have gradually found myself wondering, ‘what will it mean to be ‘a person in Christ’ when that is no longer defined by the full-time work and profile of a Minister of the Word and Sacraments that will have so formed me for the previous forty one years?’

Thus, I recognised the potential value of using the sabbatical for

- a period of spiritual and philosophical consideration – when I retire, who will I be? –
- and for another of more a practical nature – when I retire, what will I do?

II THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES OF ST IGNATIUS

To create space for focussed prayer and reflection, I arranged to make the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius at St Beuno’s Jesuit Spirituality Centre in North Wales. There are various timetables by which one can undertake these:

- online, spending part of each working day over a sustained period,
- in three ten-day residential blocks,
- or a single thirty-day silent retreat.

I undertook the latter. I had wanted to make the exercises for the past thirty years but never been able to persuade myself of why. The imperative of careful preparation for retirement at last provided motive, and the availability of sabbatical grants and a parental legacy made it feasible.

I was at St Beuno’s for thirty-six days in January and February 2023:

- three days introduction (disposition), during which talking was allowed and enjoyed;
- thirty days silent retreat, with one hour per day spiritual direction;
- and three days debrief, again with talking.

The disposition enabled the cohort to cohere in a way that sustained us throughout the ensuing silence, so that even as we ate together wordlessly there was a warm fellowship and mutual support. Those three days also enabled the trio of directors (a priest, a religious, and a lay person) to identify to which of us they would each provide direction. I was assigned to Judith Irvine, who proved to be exactly the right one: gentle and ecumenically savvy, probing and insightful.

Through the thirty days one is reflecting upon the person and work of Christ, allowing it to shape one’s own. They are divided into four periods, known as weeks.

- The first week is an in-depth encounter over several days with the extravagance of God’s love in Christ; against that backdrop one then addresses one’s need of that love, including facing up to the realities of what one may regret in one’s own story.
- The second week examines Christ’s life from birth to the triumphal entry.
- The third travels through Holy Week, lingering for a day over the events on each of its days.
- And the fourth revels in the reality of the resurrection.

On each of the thirty days, the retreatant

- has the hour of spiritual direction,

- spends five further periods in prayer, and
- attends the Mass in the Chapel, including a Bible-centred Homily.

The five periods can be spent in diverse ways: silent prayer, art, walking, etc. Academic reading is discouraged. One's director gives material each morning that facilitates exploration of that day's aspect of the person and work of Christ. It includes passages directly quoted from the sixteenth century writing of St Ignatius, complemented with relevant Biblical passages, and more contemporary items (poems, meditations, etc) indicative of the director's own perspective. My custom came to be a combination of a long walk each day (St Beuno's is at the northern end of Offa's Dyke), some artwork (as a total novice), and prayer in the quietness of my room. By and large, though not exclusively, that prayer was significantly less about me talking to God, and more about me listening for God.

I found the experience to be profound and deeply helpful, as well as demanding; they are not called 'exercises' for nothing. By way of example, I mention just one invaluable outcome. I realised whilst there that 2023 is the sixtieth anniversary of me becoming a church goer upon joining the choir aged five. The exercises provided opportunity for me to examine innumerable lessons and experiences from those six decades, and to find them woven into a renewed fabric of faith and following. There was no 'angel visitant, no rending of the clay', but rather, through examining Christ's life and my own (the aspects I treasure, and those I regret) there was the beginning of a deep-seated nourishing and rekindling of my sense of what it means to be 'in Christ', and of what that might mean in the different future that beckons. Am I being beckoned into a life of more deliberate, regular, and sustained prayer?

III FAMILY TIME

After the retreat, I appreciated four weeks with family. Bethan, my wife, is a teacher so I was eager to be home for half term. Once she had returned to work, I was able to visit her brother in Wales, with his family, and my own brother and sister, with their families, in Dorset and Devon, respectively.

IV IN THE STEPS OF J. S. BACH

The final element of the sabbatical was designed to encourage my re-engagement with music making and appreciation. Hopefully, in retirement I might return to it as a key focus of life both within and outwith the church. Trained in the 1970s as an Organist, I have always appreciated the music of J. S. Bach (1685-1750). So, for the month of March I made a journey to places in which he lived and worked in Thuringia, part of eastern Germany: Eisenach, Arnstadt, Weimar, Köthen, and Leipzig. I also visited Berlin, Dresden, and Wittenberg. It was a fine experience, in which I was able to visit various museums, churches and concert halls, each offering additional knowledge about and delight in Bach's life and work. Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809-47) was instrumental in ensuring that Bach was rescued from reputational oblivion in the 1840s. Admitting that Mendelssohn, too, is way up there amongst my favourite composers, I was delighted to add to my schedule time at Mendelssohn's Leipzig home, now a museum, and at concerts of his music. The old flame of musical fascination was more than readily reignited.

There was, though, another unanticipated aspect of the sabbatical. History has always been one of my subsidiary interests. I am more than grateful, therefore, that alongside the music, I found each place I visited offered important chances to re-explore the twentieth century history to which A-levels had pointed me in the 1970s.

- Bach's birthplace was Eisenach, where, two centuries apart, he and Martin Luther (1483-1546) attended the same Latin School. Drawing upon Luther's not uncontroversial attitude to Jewish people, the museum that celebrates him had an in-depth exhibition about Dejudaising. This explored how, in the 1920s and 30s, Protestant Christians in Germany who wished to accommodate themselves to the National Socialists, and not least to Hitler's antisemitism, sought to redefine Christianity by removing any references to Jews or to Jesus's Jewish background.
- In Weimar, I went to a concentration camp. From 1937, Buchenwald was one such, just five miles from the cultural pinnacle that had been home to Bach, Goethe, and Schiller.

- In Berlin, having taken in other WWII sites on a previous visit, I went to Hitler's Bunker, which narrates at length the rise of the Nazis, through to Hitler's death by suicide in April 1945.
- In Leipzig, I familiarised myself with the Stasi at the museum housed in its former headquarters, and with St Nicholas' Church, where the Peace Prayers every Monday evening were so influential upon the events that led to all the political changes in 1989.

And so on. The Bach extravaganza was complemented with this quite different aspect of the nation I was visiting and where I was so warmly welcomed. As a result, I now have better understanding about the implications of Britain redefining its relationship to the European Union, about the conflict in Ukraine, and about the crisis in Israel/Palestine. My sense is that alongside prayer, music may well be a big part of the new life post-retirement, but so will history and its lessons.

V CONCLUSION

Despite reluctance to take the sabbatical, I am more grateful than I can say for the privilege and blessing of this time dedicated to getting ready for whatever life holds after August 2025. To all those who made it possible, and for the grants that have funded it from the United Reformed Church and from Downing Place Church, I am and will be profoundly grateful.

N. P. Uden
30th October 2023