

RETREATS MAINTAIN INTEGRITY

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Retreats are not a luxury, but a necessity for a minister's integrity. For whatever else ministers are called to be, first and foremost they are called to be men and women of God. Just like cars need a general service every year, so too do ministers. Otherwise we run the very real risk of under-performing, if not of breaking down.

The retreats I have been on in the past have been highly intensive in nature. My last retreat, for instance, was a personally-guided semi-'Ignatian' retreat involving total withdrawal from the world – no phone calls, no listening to the radio, no watching TV, no reading the paper, no conversation with anybody apart from with a priest who specialised in spiritual direction. Every evening I would meet with him for an hour or so. At the end of our first meeting I was given three Scripture passages to form the basis of reflection the following day. All the next day I worked at those passages, meditating, praying, journaling – then at the end of the day I met up with my spiritual director, who in the light of our conversation gave me a further three Scripture passages. Needless to say, these were not any old passages – but Scriptures chosen with me specifically in mind. It was a painful experience as day after day I found myself baring my soul to God. And so it went on, a whole week of doing business with God. By the end of the process I felt exhausted – and yet exhilarated.

This year I decided I needed to do something different. I felt I didn't have the energy for the intensity of previous retreats. So I phoned the Society of Mary and Martha, based in the midst of the Devon country-side, to see if they would have me for a week. To my surprise they suggested that a 3-week 'body, mind and spirit' focus. I compromised and went for two.

The Society of Mary and Martha specialises in supporting ministers under stress – and over the year sees some 500 ministers. The fact is that far too many of us ministers suffer from the Martha syndrome – we become distracted with much serving. Instead, like Mary, we need to sit down at the Lord's feet and listen to him. In their relaxed setting I was able to do that. I had time to read, to pray, and to reflect; to do different walks every day; to snooze, to listen to the radio, even watch the TV; to enjoy a couple of massages; to generally unwind. It was a silent retreat, in the sense that although others were around, we were not encouraged to do more than say 'Hello' to one another. On my first full day I met with the two facilitators (as distinct from 'directors') – one theologically trained, the other medically trained. Thereafter I met with one or the other, six times in total.

The aim of the experience is summed up in the words of welcome given to each minister: "Here may you lay aside burdens borne for self and others. May this place be for you a vessel of love, where from you may draw rest, silence, healing and vision. And may the Creator's love warmly glow from all that you see". This was my experience. As a result I have returned with a new spiritual dynamic, ready to face all the challenges of the coming year.

So, to those readers who are ministers, if you have yet to experience a retreat (and, alas, most have not done so), then let me encourage you discover the difference that time-out with God can make. To those of you who are not ministers, let me urge you to encourage your ministers to go on retreat – apart from anything else, it's a good investment for the church!.

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