

A Sabbatical Pilgrimage: meandering reflections on my 2018 sabbatical

**Brian Walsh
CRC Campus Ministries,
University of Toronto**

I wonder whether “pilgrimage” is too big a word to describe my sabbatical. I’ve never really been drawn to the tradition of pilgrimage, though I recognize that such intentional journeys of spiritual discipline and discernment has a rich history in Christian faith. So I didn’t embark on this sabbatical with pilgrimage in mind. Rather, I was thinking more of rest, and pilgrimages seem like too much work.

My colleagues on the campus ministry staff team could see it in my face, my posture, my emotional state. I was run down, emotionally spent, spiritually depleted, and lacking the kind of energy that they had always seen me bring to our ministry. I had seen a fair bit of death over the last couple of years (my mother, Iggy Spoon, my farm neighbour, a suicide in our broader community around the farm) but nothing quite like the murder in La Loche, Saskatchewan of my friend and former farm intern Adam Wood. Conducting Adam’s funeral in the winter of 2016 was the kind of profound honour that is so deeply painful to bear. And my colleagues knew that I hadn’t had time to stop, to rest, to heal.

So my proposal to go on sabbatical, especially a sabbatical with no major writing project, was very warmly supported by the staff team (and Campus Ministry Committee). That support was incredibly important to me not just because I so appreciate the kind of mutual pastoral care and accountability that we experience as a team, but also because I knew that my colleagues would have a significantly increased work load in my absence, especially in the Wine Before Breakfast community.

The idea was to rest, go for an extended vacation, take the time to regroup, and reflect on my calling and vocation as I reached my 65th birthday. I had a couple of speaking gigs, a few very small pieces to write, and a holiday to enjoy. Any traditional notion of pilgrimage wasn’t on the agenda. But the motif of pilgrimage kept on presenting itself.

1. Writing on the way

The writing projects for this sabbatical were intentionally limited. The *Romans Disarmed* book was at press and there wouldn’t be any work to be done until the edited

manuscript came back to us in the summer. But, curiously enough, the few little projects that I had planned could all be found to resonate with the motif of pilgrimage.

On Pilgrimage with Bruce Cockburn

“Dangerous Angels: Bruce Cockburn’s long, prophetic musical pilgrimage.” *Sojourners* 47.5 (May 2018): 36-40.

The first thing on my agenda in January was to write a short review essay for *Sojourners* magazine on Bruce Cockburn’s 2017 album *Bone on Bone*. I had been so blown away by the album that I had found it impossible to write a review throughout the fall semester. The album was so rich and such a profound statement of Cockburn’s mature Christian vision of the world that I thought that I really needed to write another book, not just a review. In fact, I found myself with a serious case of writer’s block. Interest from *Sojourners*, however, made it necessary to actually sit down and write.

So I began the sabbatical writing a short article on Cockburn’s artistic career and his most recent album by bringing together two themes: wrestling with angels and (you guessed it) “pilgrimage.” I wrote that Cockburn’s is “a political and environmental spirituality tried and tested by life on the road, the life of pilgrimage: temptations, dead ends, and miraculous moments of light and hope.” If there has been a soundtrack to my Christian pilgrimage over the years, then it has been dominated by the music of Bruce Cockburn.

Walking with Jesus ... and Greg Paul

“A Spirituality Intimately Related to Jesus.” A Review of Greg Paul’s *Resurrecting Religion: Finding our Way Back to the Good News*. *Christian Courier* #3073 (April 23, 2018): 8

Greg Paul is the pastor of the Sanctuary Community in Toronto. We have been friends for a very long time, and there has been some wonderful cross fertilization between Sanctuary and Wine Before Breakfast over the years. Greg is also a very fine writer. His most recent book seeks to “resurrect religion” in the precise sense of how James defines religion: “to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1.27). When you read Greg Paul you are invited to walk with him and the Sanctuary community through some pretty deep distress. Not surprisingly, Greg’s book is an extended meditation on the epistle of James and the Beatitudes. I’ve sometimes thought of this epistle as something of a midrash on the Beatitudes.

On Pilgrimages and their Transitions

“A Good Farewell: Prayers of Taking Leave, Blessing and Commissioning.” *Reformed Worship* #128 (June, 2018): 47-48.

Within our campus ministry we are deeply intentional about marking passages. Both GCF and WBB have their own traditions for saying good bye to community members who are moving on. *Reformed Worship* found (at empireremixed.com) the “Prayers of Taking Leave, Blessing and Commissioning” that we have used at WBB over the years and asked if they could publish them in the June issue of the magazine.

Discerning the time, remixing empire

Mostly I took a leave from posting very much at Empire Remixed. But there were a few moments that seem important to name.

“Epiphany, Fire and Fury” was a piece I posted on January 6. The way in which the story of Herod and the Magi resonated with the Trump administration simply needed to be named. <http://empireremixed.com/2018/01/06/epiphany-fire-fury/>

On January 22 I marked the second anniversary of the murder of Adam Wood with a piece called “Angel’s Envy, Psalm 41 and Adam Wood.” <http://empireremixed.com/2018/01/22/angels-envy-psalm-41-adam-wood/>

The “March of our Lives” happened during Holy Week and it seemed to me that called for some comment. I posted a piece called “Holy Week and the March of our Lives” on March 26. <http://empireremixed.com/2018/03/26/holy-week-and-the-march-of-our-lives/>

Romans Disarmed: Resisting Empire, Demanding Justice

In the middle of June, Sylvia and I received the copyediting for *Romans Disarmed* and spent an intense week going through the manuscript word by word. We were pleased and grateful to have been blessed with such a fine, meticulous and informed editor. Coming to the end of the journey with this book, it is a great blessing to have an editor give such incredible support and encouragement to help us reach the finish line.

Our wonderful emerging leader, Aileen Verdun, has been contracted to prepare the indices for this book.

Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire

We were also pleasantly surprised to receive copies of the Chinese translation of *Colossians Remixed* in late July.

2. Going on the road

I was careful to not accept many speaking engagements while on sabbatical. But there were two trips that involved speaking and some writing.

Community First in Austin, TX: Going Home

Ultimately, pilgrimages are about going home. The spiritual discipline of going “away” to some kind of holy site is little more than pious narcissism if it doesn’t result in a deeper coming home. Maybe that’s why I’ve been less than drawn to much of the pilgrimage tradition. Cast within a dualistic worldview wherein home is a spiritually elevated place such as heaven, pilgrimages can result in a further distancing from our this-worldly home rather than a deepening of that home.

Home has remained a deep and abiding theme in my spirituality, ministry and writing. Some ten years ago I went to Austin, Texas to speak at a conference hosted by an innovative ministry called Mobile Loaves and Fishes. Their visionary and unconventional leader, Alan Graham, had stumbled upon my book with Steve Bouma-Prediger, *Beyond Homelessness*, and it had sparked his imagination about a response to homelessness that went beyond the “Housing First” models that had been employed in various municipalities across North America. He perceived that while it was true that housing was a foundational need in addressing homelessness, the alarming rates of recidivism amongst the recently housed homeless population indicated that something was missing. In reading our book he came to a deeper appreciation of the distinction between housing and home. What was needed was homemaking, not just housing, and for home to happen there needed to be community. So he had this vision of a village predominantly populated by formerly chronic homeless folks. He called it “Community First.”

Within seven years, the vision became a reality. Now three years old, Community First is a community of 220 units (recreational trailers, tiny homes and well designed canvas tents) in which 80% of the population had been chronically homeless (that is, they had lived rough on the streets for at least one year). At Community First, folks aren’t just housed, they are welcomed home. This is not a transitional community. This is a permanent home for its inhabitants. Check it out at <https://mlf.org/community-first/>

I’d been watching things develop from a distance over the years, and then was asked to write an endorsement of Alan Graham’s book, *Welcome Home*. Noticing that they hosted symposia three times a year for people who wanted to learn from their model, I got in touch and asked if I could come to the February 12 to 15, 2018 gathering. Alan asked if I

would give the opening talk at the symposia, and then sit back, learn, observe and enjoy. What I witnessed was remarkable. This is a beautiful and peaceful community where those who were seen as the garbage of society are welcomed as beloved and honoured members. Deep homemaking is happening at Community First.

At one point, Alan came over to me and said, "Man, your fingerprints are all over this place." If we only sold one copy of *Beyond Homelessness* and that one copy went to Alan Graham, then all the work in writing that book would have been worth it.

My pilgrimage as a follower of Jesus has always been about more deeply coming home. Home to a heavenly Father, home to who I am as a beloved child, home to my calling in the household of God, and home to community. If the sabbatical was a continuation of that kind of pilgrimage home, then the visit to Community First was a profound encouragement and affirmation.

**University of Dubuque Conference Presentation:
"Character and the Crisis of Home"**

The second speaking engagement was as the scholar in residence and plenary speaker at the Wendt Character conference at Dubuque University in Iowa. Again, *Beyond Homelessness* played a key role in the conference. Themes that Steve Bouma-Prediger and I had developed in that book shaped the research of the Wendt Center for Character Education for the year and provided the overall focus of the conference, "Character and Place: How We Shape Home and Home Shapes Us,"

It was good to return to themes of character formation as I wrote this paper. I have been thinking and writing about character, virtue and narrative for quite a number of years now, and in *Beyond Homelessness* we explicitly addressed what we called homemaking virtues. Further, one of the over-riding goals of our campus ministry has been the shaping of Christian character within the context of community, liturgy and scripture. My presentation was video recorded and posted here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJ3UrxrDduk> I suspect that this paper will become foundational to a longer essay, or perhaps even a book, in the future.

The Thinking Faith Network, Leeds UK

Below I will talk about the five week vacation that Sylvia and I enjoyed. The point of the trip was that it was non-working ... mostly. We spoke at two events along the way because we were visiting friends in these places and it was relatively easy to do these presentations. The first event was a wonderful evening in Leeds with WYSOCS. We

simply shared something of what we are up to in our forthcoming book, *Romans Disarmed* to enthusiastic and encouraging response.

St. Andrews University Biblical Studies Department Seminar

While visiting our friend Tom Wright in St. Andrews, Scotland, Sylvia and I also did a seminar presentation for his course on “Temple and Cosmos.” We titled our presentation, “The Desecration of the Temple: Creation’s Lament,” and read a section from the *Romans Disarmed* manuscript. The response seemed almost befuddled. “You can do theology like that??”

3. Scholarly and Spiritual Accompaniment on the Path

Teaching and mentoring have been consistent dimensions of my calling in campus ministry. While my timetable might have been to take a sabbatical during the Winter semester of 2018, that did not automatically absolve me of certain mentoring responsibilities. So I continued to walk with four students as they completed their masters work at Wycliffe College this semester. These students have been on their own paths, their own pilgrimages of discernment and deepening of Christian faith. It was important for me to continue to walk with these brothers to the end of this particular academic part of their journey.

Juan Sebastian Maldonado completed his very fine MTS thesis, *From the Pearly Gates to the Neighbourhood: A Contextual Theology for Disadvantaged Youth*. Sebastian attempted to redeem what he knows of systematic theology by contextualizing the doctrines of sin, justification and eschatology in the Jane / Finch neighbourhood. Wonderful work. I am excited that Sebastian will continue to be a colleague in CRC campus ministry at the York University Logos Christian Community.

Rob Irish is a member of the Faculty Fellowship and teaches in the Faculty of Engineering. Some years ago he embarked on a MTS program for his own theological deepening. His thesis, *“In the garden also always the thorn” Adapting and Learning from Benedict’s Rule for a Non-Monastic Faith* was a beautifully written, wonderfully creative and deeply wise reflection on Christian spirituality in the face of crisis and in the shadow of empire. It was an honour to accompany Rob on this pilgrimage of learning and discernment.

I first met **Clark Whitney** in the early 80’s when I was teaching “Christian Worldview” courses as part of the ICS campus outreach program. So we met in the context of campus ministry. He has been taking MTS courses at Wycliffe for more than a decade, seeking theological depth and spiritual discernment in the midst of his work in the

financial sector. His thesis, *And They will Dream dreams: Calling and Aging*, kind of mirrored my own pilgrimage these past months. Essentially Clark argued that modern notions of “retirement” lack the depth of a biblical understanding of calling and aging. As we age our callings might change, grow and develop, but we are never without vocation in the Kingdom of God. The question is, what is my vocation *now*, in the context of my life at this age and in this place? While I have been walking the pilgrimage path with Clark for almost 40 years, it seemed that he was accompanying me more than I was accompanying him in this summative project for his MTS program.

Jesse Surdigo is the director of Yonge Street Mission Evergreen Youth Centre and a MA student at Regis College. His thesis, “An In-Between Realm: Meeting those who are “marginalized” between the public and private realm” was directed by Mary Jo Leddy and I was the second reader.

Another kind of scholarly accompaniment is in supporting colleagues in their work. **Steve Bouma-Prediger** has been a friend for thirty five years and one of my co-authors. The work that we did together on ecological virtues in *Beyond Homelessness* had its earlier expression in his book *For the Beauty of the Earth*. Steve has continued to reflect on an ecological virtue ethic in a new book, *Earthkeeping and Character: Exploring a Christian Ecological Virtue Ethic*. I spent a number of weeks in the summer reading and commenting on this manuscript before it was submitted to the publisher.

4. Other moments of Accompaniment

I’m kind of glad that there were these theses to attend to as well as a number of other important events that necessarily “interrupted” the sabbatical. I appreciate the notion of protecting sabbatical time, and I am grateful and humbled by the ways in which my campus ministry colleagues so diligently protected my time. But sabbaticals can be a tad self-indulgent and it is important to be brought back into the moments of important accompaniment that remind us that any pilgrimage on the path with Jesus is a pilgrimage into deeper service. So there were some ordinations and some weddings to celebrate while I was on sabbatical.

On January 14, **Erinn Oxford** was ordained as a Baptist pastor in the context of her ministry at The Dale, a creative church community amongst the marginalized in Parkdale. WBB has had a close relationship with this ministry for many years. I attended this ordination as pastor of the WBB community.

Geoff Wichert’s ordination to ministry in the Mennonite Church was celebrated on March 18. I was honoured to be asked to participate in that wonderful celebration with

three short reflections pieces. Then, a week later on March 25, **Sara DeMoor** was ordained as a licensed pastor in the CRC for her ministry at Guelph Campus Ministry. There was no way that the strictures of a sabbatical were going to stop me from participating in the laying on of hands and prayer for Sara that Sunday morning!

And then there is the wonderful gift of marriage. For the last year and a half I had been walking with **MP Stevens** and **Erik Schneiderhan** down the path of renewing their marriage vows after 20 years together. Erik is a sociology professor at U of T and MP had worked in the international education department of the university when we first met. Through long conversations and some deep reflection, they came to the place of renewing their vows in a wonderful service on May 26.

Simon Bearisto has been a member of the WBB community, a street pastor with Sanctuary, and one of my MTS students for a number of years. On July 7, I co-led Simon's marriage to **Amanda Marlow**. This was a wonderful "kingdom" event. The scope and depth of community that gathered on that Saturday afternoon was another moment of profound spiritual encouragement during the sabbatical pilgrimage.

The **Office for Social Justice** and **Centre for Public Dialogue** are CRC ministries that attempt to facilitate and give leadership to the justice ministry of the church. On August 15 Sylvia and I were happy to host a staff retreat for these ministry colleagues, engaging in brainstorming and theological reflection on how to best communicate the biblical foundations for such a justice ministry, especially in the face of opposition from within the denomination.

5. Vacation as Pilgrimage?

On this sabbatical Sylvia and I did something that we have never done before. We took a long vacation. Geoff Wichert has been on my case for years to take holidays in the summer, but the most I've done has been a week here, and a weekend there. This year, to celebrate our 25th anniversary, together with my 65th birthday, Sylvia planned a five week trip that took us to Holland, England, Scotland and Ireland. Geoff is right. I needed a real holiday, and apart from the two little speaking gigs that I noted above, this was such a time of rest, enjoyment and surprisingly deep sabbath. Sylvia's amazing work putting this whole trip together was a wonderful gift.

Again, the idea wasn't pilgrimage. Some time to reflect and rest? Yes. Some long walks in a new pair of hiking boots? Sure. Maybe even visiting some important sites of Christian identity and tradition along the way. But pilgrimage? Not so much. However,

when a trip like this happens in the context of a process of discernment, maybe it will take the character of something like a pilgrimage.

Going to Church

This is not the place to give a travelogue of our vacation, but it is perhaps worth noting that we spent a lot of time in churches. I've lost count of how many cathedrals we visited. A noonday Eucharist at Westminster Abbey was a great experience. As tourists wandered around the perimeter a small group of us entered into the kind of worship that this great space was built for. And we also visited a number of ancient ruins in Ireland where we learned more of the monastic tradition of that great island, and its suppression by the forces of English colonizers. (English oppression is never far from the Irish imagination.) In fact we ended our vacation with a three day stay at a hermitage at the site of St. Kevin's monastic city of Glendalough. Avoiding the tourists who flock to this site, we enjoyed the quiet of this hermitage hosted by the Sisters of Mercy.

During Morning Prayer I found myself listening deeply to what God might be saying to me at this stage of my life. And I didn't hear anything "new." Now maybe I wasn't looking for anything new, or more specifically, I wasn't expecting some voice to say, "Yo Walsh, here's what I've got in mind for you to do next." No divine Five Year Plan! What I heard, or at least what I had a deep sense of, was that my calling hasn't changed. The calling remains to be a pastor, a teacher, a writer. More specifically, I still feel deeply called to cultural engagement and leadership that is deeply and dynamically rooted in a radically biblical Christian discipleship. That doesn't mean that I should stay in my position as a CRC campus minister forever. How long I continue in my present position at U of T remains a matter of personal and communal discernment. But it seems clear to me that my calling has not changed even though the way in which that calling will be carried out will undoubtedly take different form in the years to come.

Going to Beachy Head

But there was another moment on this trip that was deeply moving. With our friend, Douglas Holt (an Anglican priest) we visited Beachy Head in the South of England. Beachy Head is famous for its beautiful towering cliffs at the sea. But this place is also famous as a suicide destination site. People come from far away, indeed around the world, to end their life with a jump off of these cliffs into the rocks and sea below. So it was with some trepidation that we visited these cliffs. But the alarming rate of suicide at this place has created a response from the Christian community. The Beachy Head Chaplaincy is a team of some 25 people, most of whom are volunteers, who patrol the

area, engage folks who seem to be in distress and assist in the recovery of bodies and the trauma and grief of those who have been left behind. While we were at Beachy Head we noticed one of the chaplains talking to a policeman as a helicopter was scanning the coastline. As we passed the chaplain a little while later, I asked him to tell us about his ministry. Tears ran down my face as he told us of how they engage somewhere between 3 and 5 people a day who are contemplating suicide. These chaplains have developed something of a sixth sense in discerning who might be in crisis. Every day they talk to people with suicidal ideations. And pretty much every day, someone slips through and jumps to their death.

In our campus ministry, we are no strangers to providing care for folks with thoughts of suicide in their hearts. And I have come to believe over the years that just as the gospel has a preferential option for the poor, so also is there a hermeneutical privilege to suffering. We see the world more clearly through tear filled eyes. Indeed, we see the world more like God does when we allow suffering to shape our vision. My interaction with this chaplain on the cliffs of Beachy Head has only deepened this conviction. I am still not sure how this will continue to shape my calling.

On Reading Brueggemann ... again ... on the hunt for hope

I ended my sabbatical by returning to the writings of Walter Brueggemann. I kind of wonder why I didn't just start there and spend the whole sabbatical time reading his magnificent body of work. I have sometimes commented that pretty much everything that I have written since I first started reading Brueggemann in the late 80's has been a series of footnotes to his biblically prophetic contribution to the life of the church.

Just before my sabbatical began I had dinner with long-time Christian psychotherapist Diane Marshall. Diane has been an incredible supporter of our ministry through the therapeutic care she has given to so many in our community. I was suggesting to her that it seems as though we are experiencing something of an epidemic of depression amongst young adults in our time. She shook her head and said, "not depression, but despair." An epidemic of despair. But in naming that despair, there is a glimmer of hope. Reflecting on Jeremiah, Brueggemann says that unspoken despair gives birth to rage. We can see this kind of rage everyday in the news, and sometimes stirring deep within our own hearts. While ungrieved life "blocks all new gestures," "grief bespeaks possibility."¹ "Indeed it is in the specific, concrete expression of despair that there come

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Like Fire in the Bones: Listening for the Prophetic Word in Jeremiah* (Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 165.

the seeds and possibilities of hope.”² Of course, there are no guarantees. Sometimes a devastating expression of grief only deepens the grief, sometimes unto death. But if there is to be hope, it will not be found in numbing denial.

Hope, we confess, is found in a God who bears our grief and insists upon life in the face of death. To hope is to go with the grain of a universe created in love. In hope we refuse to allow the present culture of despair to have the last word. Usually against the evidence, necessarily with the biblical text in our hands, and invariably with tears on our cheeks, we say to the darkness, “we beg to differ.”³ My sabbatical has been a time to deepen that conviction and rekindle that hope. Without hope, the pilgrimage is over because it has no place to go. From Austin to Dubuque, from Beachy Head to Glendalough, from Amsterdam to London to Edinburgh to Dublin to Toronto to Russet House farm; joining others on the way, I think that now I’ll follow the advice of Bruce Cockburn as I take up my load “run south to the road / turn to the setting sun / sun going down / got to cover some ground / before everything comes undone.” Things *are* coming undone and there is work to be done.

² Ibid., 187.

³ Of course, a reference to Mary Jo Leddy’s amazing book, *Say to the Darkness: “We Beg to Differ”* (Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1990).