

So what about that Sabbatical, Brian?

I've been away for a while (May through August 2015), and I'm back. Of course, it's not nearly as simple as that. So ...here are some questions and answers:

How did the sabbatical come about?

For the past ten years or so, the United Church of Canada has had a policy that a minister is eligible for a 3-month sabbatical after they have been in ministry in a pastoral charge for 5 years and each 5 years after that. My 5-year anniversary at Knox was April 1, 2015.

While I never took a sabbatical in my last pastoral charge (where I served for 10 years), even though I was eligible, it felt both appropriate and beneficial to consider taking a sabbatical at this time. It was approved through the M&P Committee and then through the Board. The sabbatical time was combined with my regular one month vacation time, so I was actually away from regular church work for 4 months.

What is the purpose of a sabbatical?

Here's what the United Church website has to say: A sabbatical is "an occasion for reflection, recreation and revitalization, unencumbered by their usual and customary responsibilities, and yet still receiving their usual remuneration and benefits. Sabbatical finds expression in study, rest, spiritual retreat, and prayer." My plans included a study trip to Iona Abbey in Scotland and some general touring there, along with focused reading and reflection for the balance of the time.

What did you actually do on your sabbatical?

The Scotland Trip: The first six weeks of the sabbatical included the trip to Scotland for Susan and I. Our one-week experience at Iona happened at the beginning of that trip, and was certainly a highlight of the trip and indeed the whole sabbatical time.

Iona is a very small island off the west coast of Scotland, and was a centre for early Christianity in that region, originating with the work of Saint Columba in the late 500's CE. The Abbey buildings themselves were in ruins from about the 1400's until being rebuilt in the 1930's.

Our week at Iona Abbey was a summer course through the University of the Islands and Highlands (Isn't that just the greatest name?) focused on the history of Saint Columba and his version of early Christianity, as well as the art of that time and region. I learned that 'Celtic Christianity' is not so much a particular 'brand' of Christianity as it is an approach to faith that incorporates a range of historic Christian and non-Christian thought and understanding. It originated with the earliest missionaries to the British Isles, including Saint Columba and Saint Patrick and their disciples. Susan and I also experienced Iona Abbey as a 'thin place' – a place where the world of God's Spirit and the world of our everyday sensibility connect even more closely than might normally be the case. It is a sacred space for sure. The island's natural environment added much to our experience of this special place.

Following our week on Iona, Susan and I embarked on a three week driving tour of the Western Highlands and central Scotland, including the Isle of Skye, Inverness, Glasgow, the Cairngorm mountain district, and Edinburgh. Among many other memorable places, we visited the ancestral castle home of the Maitland clan in Lauder

just southeast of Edinburgh. The tour was wonderful in spite of raining almost every day, although I never did get comfortable driving on those wickedly narrow roads!

The Rest of the Sabbatical: Once we arrived home from Scotland (and got healthy again after a late-trip experience of a nasty digestive upset), I settled into a routine of spending mornings doing various tasks and projects around our home, and then spending the afternoons reading, note-taking and reflecting with some of the many books I had brought home from the church for sabbatical reading. One of my plans had been to use one of my books and internet resources to learn some biblical Greek, the original language of the Newer Testament. It didn't take very long to discover that this wasn't going to work well at all! If I really want to learn Greek, I'll need to take a course through one of the Saskatoon seminaries.

A similar outcome came when I tried to learn from a book some of the basic guitar chords and strumming, after my guitar has languished unused for thirty or more years. Again, it became clear that I'll need some direct lessons to help me figure out just how my fingers are supposed to fit in those oh-so-awkward ways to make some of those chords. Sometimes book-learning isn't the way to go.

While other reading continued, this pattern was overtaken by local events, as Susan and I were 'called up' as Red Cross volunteers to work with some of the hundreds of people who had been evacuated to Saskatoon from the summer's northern fires. She and I spent 2 ½ weeks assisting with that effort, generally working five-day stretches with one with one or two rest days between. While not part of my original plans, this work ended up fitting very well into the whole sabbatical experience, given my underlying desire to deepen my connection to my own spiritual landscape. This work with evacuees was indeed spiritually both rewarding and revealing.

More reading and reflection followed, aimed toward deepening spirituality in my own life and in my leadership for the life of the church. A break in August was a trip to Ottawa where our whole family gathered to spend time with our daughter who had moved there from Baltimore. There was also an enforced break mid-summer while I spent a week laying flat to begin recovering from a back injury that came from my own reluctance to recognize the limitations of my body that's not so young anymore!

So the sabbatical was a series of focused and more intensive experiences interspersed among quieter times of reading reflection and relaxation.

What did you gain from your sabbatical time?

It's hard to name direct and immediate benefits from the sabbatical time, because so much of its impact will be long-term rather than short. One major blessing was having the extended time to let a fundamental spiritual and vocational question sit within me while I came to some discernment about a direction. This question is two-fold, and is there in the background for most ministers much of the time: Is church ministry still what I am being called to do? Is ministry with this church and its people still life-giving for the congregation and for me?

I intentionally made myself not arrive at an answer to this pair of questions until the sabbatical time was almost over, to make sure that the whole of my sabbatical time and experience would inform my discernment. In the end, the answer to both parts of the question came to be, "Yes."

Yes, ministry in and through the church is still my vocational calling. And yes, I believe the people of Knox United and I still have a life-giving relationship and plenty of room for both of us to grow and journey further on our spiritual pathways together.

Beyond, that, my own spirituality has deepened and broadened through my sabbatical experiences and the reading and reflection I have done, and that surely will come out in the nature and direction of my work with the church. You may not see anything notably and dramatically different in what I do and how I do it. But I suspect you may notice me leaning further in some directions, and perhaps less in others, whether that is in worship leadership or in work with different groups and committees. I'll seek to try some new approaches and new areas of emphasis in worship, some of which may be fruitful and others perhaps not.

In the end, it's the journey together that feeds us all, and that journey continues.

Blessings,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be "Brian", written in a cursive style.