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STUDENT DECLARATION

This assignment is entirely my own work, and has not been submitted for another validated HE module. All material from the work of others not involved in the assessment is acknowledged, and quotations and paraphrases are suitably indicated.

Or: In the case of work assessed as a group project, the work has been prepared in collaboration with other members of the group.

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**How do pioneers experience spiritual retreats and what are
the benefits and challenges they encounter?**

July 2023

Abstract

The aim of this research is to investigate how pioneers experience the practice of spiritual retreat and to explore the benefits and challenges they encountered.

Pioneer ministers face a specific set of problems and are therefore vulnerable to burnout, isolation and misunderstanding. My research reveals what will contribute to healthy pioneer practice by investing time in a spiritual retreat. Through a series of semi-structured interviews with those engaged in pioneer ministry, I identified seven themes which explore the practices, benefits and challenges. The themes include: encounter, silence and solitude, prayer rhythms, cultivating my spirituality, life is busy, minds and hearts culminating with who am I? The results demonstrate the benefits participants recorded that included: friendship with God, finding support and refreshment for themselves and the opportunity to pay attention to their interior life. Likewise, the results reveal the challenges participants faced including: external pressures like time management and internal pressures such as guilt, self-criticism and busy minds. I also include two chapters on how retreat is rooted in the life of Jesus and in the lives of the desert mothers and fathers. Finally, for pioneers to build sustainable ministries in the face of challenging factors this research enables them and those that train pioneers to understand how a consistent rhythm of retreat shapes healthy practice.

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to my supervisor Liz Hoare for guiding me through my dissertation process and for helping me with her knowledge on this topic. I also want to thank the staff at CMS for inspiring new lines of thinking and for broadening my thinking on particular topics. I especially thank my tutor Cathy Ross for her support and encouragement along my learning journey. Finally, I want to thank my Cymbrogi – companions of the heart who walk with me.

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Introduction

The pressures of working in full-time ministry and the subsequent fallout demonstrate that this vocation is not an easy path to choose. Furthermore, there are those within the church who feel called to undertake pioneer ministry who face an additional set of challenges. The Church of England's working definition of pioneers says this:

*“Pioneers are people called by God who are the first to see and creatively respond to the Holy Spirit’s initiatives with those outside the church; gathering others around them as they seek to establish new contextual Christian community”.*¹

This definition hints at the potential problems pioneers face, for example, being the first to see suggests that the pioneer may not enjoy the collective vision of the rest of the church to support them in what they are seeing. Woodham identifies five issues pioneers face.² Firstly, despite the definition above a great deal of inconsistency in its understanding exists. Secondly, a lack of recognition as to the distinctiveness of the pioneer calling.³ This is followed by poor support structures, a lack of funding and low trust in pioneers who are sometimes seen as mavericks that want to dismantle traditional church structures.⁴

Therefore, for those entering this field it will be essential to establish healthy practice at the beginning of their ministry journeys. So, what might assist pioneer ministers to curate healthy practice to ensure they avoid the pitfalls of burnout, disillusionment and giving up altogether? How do pioneer ministers maintain a vibrant and living relationship with the God they hope to introduce others to?

Whilst there is no one answer to these questions, I propose that an important step that aids healthy pioneer practice is to undertake a regular spiritual retreat. What

¹The Church of England, *Vocations to pioneer ministry*, <https://www.churchofengland.org/life-events/vocations/vocations-pioneer-ministry#:~:text=Pioneers%20are%20people%20called%20by,establish%20new%20contextual%20Christian%20community>. [accessed 06 June 23].

² Jeremy Woodham, *5 Issues facing pioneers today* (2017), <https://pioneer.churchmissionsociety.org/2017/03/5-issues-facing-pioneers-today/> [accessed 06 June 23].

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

follows in this dissertation is the explanation as to why I think this. But what do we mean by the term spiritual retreat? A multitude of definitions exist but as we consider some of these, we will gather an overall flavour of what this term means. Jones, Wainwright and Yarnold point out that retreat:

*“is to seek God and to rest in his presence in a time set apart for prayer and reflection...it is a journey inwards to know God.”*⁵

Griffin suggests that:

*“Retreat is a generous commitment to friendship with God...is an opportunity for spiritual formation.”*⁶

Vennard concludes:

*A retreat places God and the things of God in the foreground of our attention. A retreat opens the time and the space so that we may hear God’s still small voice. A retreat is about listening and waiting, receiving and being.”*⁷

Finally, Barton argues that retreat is not a self-indulgent luxury or something to wait until we are less busy but:

*“is an extended time apart for the purpose of being with God and giving God our full attention...”*⁸

From these definitions we see that retreats are intentional times set apart to meet with God which involves prayer and opening up a space to hear the still small voice of God. There are a growing number of retreat providers and different types of retreat are on offer. The variety include themed retreats that are led on a particular

⁵ *The Study of Spirituality*, ed. by Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright and Edward Yarnold, (London: SPCK, 1992), p.579.

⁶ Emilie Griffin, *Wilderness Time* (Englewood: HarperOne Publishers, 1997), p.3.

⁷ Jane Vennard, *Be Still* (Durham: Alban Institute, 2000), p.x.

⁸ Ruth Hayley Barton, *Invitation to retreat* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018), p.4.

topic such as marriage, silent retreats, quiet days at a retreat centre, an Ignatian retreat which undertakes Ignatius Spiritual Exercises and staying at home retreats.⁹

My research will focus on how pioneer ministers engaged with the practice of retreat and how they structured their time whilst there. We will seek to explore the particular spiritual disciplines they used and importantly what did they report were the benefits they encountered and the challenges they faced. From this a picture will emerge of what constitutes healthy pioneer practice which will also assist those training new pioneers as well as the pioneers themselves. In addition, we will explore how the practice of retreat is rooted in the life of Jesus and is further demonstrated in the lives of the desert mothers and fathers in the history of early Christianity.

Methodology

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were recruited from the Church Mission Society (CMS) who were all pioneers either in training or working for CMS on the field. Each of these were selected as they are currently involved in pioneering ministries. The total number of participants was six with four directly known to myself and two within my CMS network. The profile of the participants included two males and four females, four were married and two were single, three participants were ordained and three were lay ministers. The number was selected given the time available and as qualitative research tends to use smaller samples.¹⁰

⁹ Liz Hoare, *Going on retreat* (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd, 2019), p.14.

¹⁰ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2013), p.55.

Data Collection and Analysis

The participants were each contacted by email inviting them to be interviewed and following their response was sent a participant information sheet, a consent form that was signed prior to the interview and an agreed date for the interview to take place. The interviews were semi-structured lasting for forty minutes and were conducted over Zoom. These were recorded with the consent of the participant. The advantage of using semi-structured interviews include being able to gather rich and detailed data about individual experiences and perspectives.¹¹ In addition, I could probe and ask unplanned questions.¹²

Each of the interviews were then transcribed an example can be seen in Appendix 1. Data from the transcribes was then coded and themes extracted from this. The themes were then examined to produce a picture of how pioneers experience retreats, why they felt it necessary to do and what obstacles they encountered. For each of the final two chapters on Jesus and the desert saint's primary and secondary sources were referenced.

Ethics

This study adheres to the guidelines of the Ripon College Cuddesdon Research Ethics Policy. It includes all data being anonymized so that participants cannot be identified. Data that is stored electronically will be stored until the completion of my dissertation.

Researcher Perspective

This section is as Braun and Clarke state "about bringing the researcher into the research, making us visible as part of the research process."¹³ My church

¹¹ Ibid, p.80.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, p.37.

background did not include the practice of taking spiritual retreats. I came to faith in an Evangelical church that nurtured me predominately in the Bible and acts of service. Some years later I transitioned into a charismatic church where again spiritual retreat was not a feature. After moving overseas to join Youth with A Mission in New Zealand I was introduced to the practice of hearing God's voice although not in the context of retreats. I later joined an Anglican church, St George's, in Auckland and from here I began to attend retreats organised by the church and also began exploring home retreats with close friends. My beliefs grew in the concept of intimacy with God and how important it was to set aside time for a deeper abiding based on the Gospel of John chapter 15.

Currently, as I write this paper, I am taking a year-long sabbatical during which I have been visiting different retreat experiences to explore the topic in a more immersive way. At the start of my sabbatical year, I attended a quiet day run at Saint Columba's House. The theme of the retreat was John chapter 4 the woman at the well. Through meditation on this passage, I felt the invitation of God to become a spiritual explorer and enter into an adventure with him during my sabbatical. I processed this further with my spiritual director who also led this retreat. The next month I attended an online retreat run by The House of Prayer in East Molesey. The theme of this retreat was the Carmelite Mystics. After a time of teaching on a particular mystic we were invited to meditate on what we felt God was speaking to us through their lives. I was particularly moved by the words of Teresa Benedicta of the Cross when she wrote, "The world is in flames. Are you impelled to put them out? Look at the cross."¹⁴ This spoke to me about the power of prayer. The next month I returned to St Columba's for a quiet day for which the theme was St Francis of Assisi. Here I felt God speak to me through the words he spoke to St Francis "repair my house."¹⁵ I applied this to my desire to disciple others and my passion for spiritual formation.

¹⁴ Before the face of God Saint Edith Stein <
<https://www.kolbefoundation.org/gbookwebsite/studentlibrary/greatestbooks/aaabooks/stein/faceofgod.html#III%20AT%20THE%20FOOT%20OF%20THE%20CROSS> > [accessed 01 June 23].

¹⁵ Saint Bonaventure, *The Life of Saint Francis* (London, Aeterna Press, 2015), p.9.

My next month's retreat was with a friend at an Airbnb on the beach at Lancing. Our theme was taken from Margaret Silf's book 'At sea with God.' The book includes some excellent reflective exercises which we followed, taking time out to meditate on. An example exercise asked what kind of boat might represent your life?¹⁶ As I meditated, I felt that God showed me two boats, one was a kayak representing adventure and the other was a canal boat, representing meandering with friends slowly enjoying the passing scenery. Later on in the year I attended two led retreats at Lee Abbey, the first was led by Jill Weber from 24/7 Prayer. Here I felt God speak to me through the scripture Isaiah 42:16 and how he was leading me "by ways they have not known along unfamiliar paths". For this we used the practice of lectio divina. The second retreat was led by Steven Aisthorpe in which the theme was 'Rewilding'. Here I meditated on how nature that is left without human intervention will often reveal hidden plants that spring up. Our lives need times of rewilding to allow God to bring forth the hidden seeds he has planted there. During each of the retreats I have attended I shared many of the practices the participants in this study used on retreat.

If I think about how my experiences have shaped my research, I would point to two key factors. Firstly, having experienced the benefits of retreat myself I was more attuned to the positive experiences of my participants and was therefore able to draw this out in the themes of the data. Secondly, living in a culture which highly values busyness and where I had witnessed the negative effects on ministry, I wanted to focus the research on how participants overcame the prevailing culture.

My journey this past year in my research into this topic has impacted me in a number of ways. Firstly, I had an assumption at the start that this practice was fairly mainstream in the church but this was challenged by participants who encountered resistance in their church to attending a retreat. Through this I have found myself seeking to 'educate' those in ministry of its importance, through conversation or formal teaching. A further way this research has impacted me has been to change

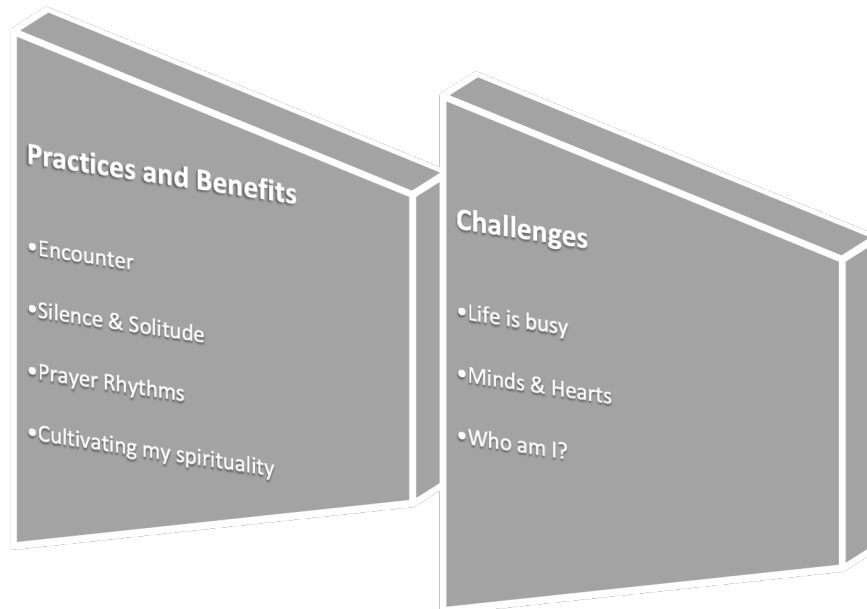
¹⁶ Margaret Silf, *At Sea with God* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2003), p.5.

my own practice and intentionally schedule retreat times so I too can continue to reap its benefits.

Connection

To monitor my connection with participants I kept a research journal and completed this after each interview. One of the purposes for this was to help me improve on any mistakes I had made during previous interviews. It also enabled me to record where I felt participants had particularly put weight on certain issues that would be useful to my research. One of the insights I realized during the interviews was the role the interviews themselves played in affirming the good practice the participants already had in place to take care of their well-being. One participant commented how they realized that simply talking about their practice reminded them of how much they enjoyed retreats and how it prompted them to take another retreat.

Findings



Introduction

In this chapter I will present the findings of my research. I will focus predominantly on those aspects which are relevant to my research question. The first section of results will focus on the practices, how participants experience retreats and the perceived benefits that participants experienced whilst taking a retreat. This will be followed by the challenges of coming into a time of retreat and challenges that were acknowledged over the duration of the retreat. The key themes that emerged during the interview process and will be presented in this chapter include: encounter, silence and solitude, prayer rhythms, cultivating my spirituality, life is busy, minds and hearts, who am I?

Practices and Benefits

Participants engaged with a range of practices across different types of retreats. These practices included: prayer, silence and solitude, meditation on scripture, lectio divina, labyrinths, spiritual direction, engaging with nature, journaling and using creative arts. There were various types of retreats participants engaged with which included: silent retreats, themed retreats, solo retreats and quiet days. The locations of these varied from monasteries, convents, retreat houses, cottages and sheds. The retreat durations also varied from one day to weekends, up to thirty-day retreats. Also detailed in this section will be the perceived benefits that participants reported receiving from the practice of taking a spiritual retreat.

Encounter

The topic of this overarching theme explains how participants reported experiencing a deep sense of connection to God in many diverse ways and this was a key focus for their time on retreat. Lorraine¹⁷ commented, “I tend to see retreats as places of meeting with God.” When asked about how retreat helped, she reflected, “it is a kind of loving yourself...and just having that deep connection with God.” In addition, all participants described how they had felt or sensed God speaking to them during a time of retreat. Hearing God was a frequent benefit that participants talked about. Peter commented that retreats helped him to “really hear God in an undisturbed environment” and he commented “I feel like I meet the loving affirmation of God.” Jack commented how he had been sitting in a chapel at a retreat centre and had “a real sense God had something to say to me and I wrote it down.” He reflected how later he realized “it was something quite prophetic.”

God’s presence with participants on retreat was frequently described by a sense of accompaniment, of discovering personal friendship with God, terms like “just me and God” and “being with Jesus” was used to describe this. Lorraine commented how

¹⁷ All names have been changed to be pseudonyms.

taking communion on retreat was “often a more meaningful moment between me and God.” Diana likewise described her retreat times as a “wonderful day with God.”

Situated in some of the more challenging places comes with a personal cost to the pioneer and can feed a sense of isolation. Participants saw retreats as times to remind themselves that God was present to them and had not left them alone. Caron commented, “living on a council estate we had a lot of stuff coming at you...” she identified the benefit of getting away to “retreat to connect with God.” Encountering God whilst on retreat helped to put difficult things in participants ministry into a wider story the story of having friendship with God and not being alone.

A strong theme of how participants experienced the presence of God was frequently expressed in the practice of being outdoors in nature. Participants reflected on how this practice revealed the pace of life where they had little time to even notice what surrounded them and pointed them to the presence of God. They used words like attentiveness, mindfulness, noticing, taking and making time to see, when describing how being in nature aided them to really appreciate God in creation. From leaves, birds, rainbows, patches of grass, breaks in the clouds, participants identified different pictures they felt God used to speak to them. Jack described his time spent in nature as facilitating him to have a “kind of attentiveness...that enable some interesting connections.” Investing time on retreat to be out in nature through walking, running or sitting still outside, further facilitated connection to God. Caron agreed sharing about her outdoor time during a retreat, “I got into a routine that every afternoon for at least three or four hours I would walk in the countryside and pray, just noticing the beauty...God had created.” Sally likewise shared this in her reflection, “...it is almost a mindfulness type practice stopping and looking at nature...usually we are too busy to even notice... that brings me closer to God.” On retreat participants reported experiencing the sacred in natural phenomenon that gave further connection to God. Caron described a time on retreat when she prayed, “Oh God I want to meet you” and whilst out walking she saw a break in the clouds, a rainbow and the sun break through. She reflected, “I just really felt that God was like very personal.

God was like this is for you...it felt very much like an encounter with God in that place.”

Engaging with a retreat guide or spiritual director on retreat also helped participants hear God, receive a healing touch and experience God’s wisdom through God’s people. Lorraine valued the opportunity to try something that was “not my churchmanship normally but was healing” and that was the practice of confession with a retreat guide. Participants valued processing their experiences with a spiritual director. Sally commented that she anticipated time with a spiritual director “in terms of expecting that God is going to speak through that person.” This she identified “definitely enriched the experience” of retreat, hearing God through another person. The setting of a monastery or convent enabled participants to connect with the wisdom of God from those who live in community full time. Jack also commented that meeting with a monk on retreat “proved to be really significant in terms of what I was reflecting on.” Participants valued the accompaniment of a wise guide whilst on retreat and reflected on different ways the guide benefited them to connect with God in a deeper way.

In this theme of Encounter, participants spoke of hearing God speak to them personally, through other people and through diverse ways in nature. The reported benefits of encountering God included, healing, feeling affirmed, experiencing friendship with God, discovering the presence of God in unusual ways in nature. Meeting God through the different practices on retreat brought participants a strong sense they were not alone and retreat provided an opportunity to be intentional in building their friendship with God. In opening themselves to encounter God through the different practices, participants experienced being led into a greater self-understanding found in our next theme. The benefits of encounter assisted participants to shape what a healthy pioneering practice might look like.

Silence and Solitude

This overarching theme explains how participants engaged with silence and solitude across a variety of practices. There was a contrast in how participants experienced silence from welcoming the opportunity to enjoy it, to struggling with fear about what might come up for them during it. For example, Diana a parent with four children pioneering on a housing estate commented, “I particularly like silence because I’m from a noisy household and have a busy church life...I like to sit outside and let God speak to me.” However, Sally a lay pioneer, who had previously been in a denomination where worship was all about noise reflected, “I think for a long time I avoided silence because I couldn’t hear God.” Apart from the contrast silence also provided a much-needed refuge on retreat. Lorraine in a rural pioneering context stated, “I needed the silence...listening to God and not worrying about anybody else.” Carving out time to get away to be alone with God was something Peter a pioneer in a multicampus church said he had “to be intentional about solitude...and a day of solitude was always helpful.”

Silence and solitude on retreat was a practice that participants recognized they had grown into. Participants spoke of a journey in discovering the value of silence which in the past had not always been something they sought. Sally identified how she now enjoyed silence after years of experiencing constant noise on the inside that in later years was replaced by peace. Likewise, Jack an ordained pioneer reported how he had “grown into silence through my experience of pioneering...” Silence was also seen as a time to receive and reconnect with God after being in a place of constantly giving out to others. Some participants were enabled to grow in this practice by interacting with the Bible. Jack used *lectio divina* as a way of contemplating scripture and stated, “I tend to spend the first hour in silence...sitting with a Psalm or passage of scripture...sometimes a piece of scripture will speak in a way I haven’t anticipated.” Caron a pioneer working in inner London agreed, “I have found God through reading the Gospels, through imaginative Ignatian practices also.” The growth identified by participants in this practice was seen as a benefit in their overall sense of well-being. They reported that silence and solitude provided a place of

refuge and peace away from the demands of pioneering ministry, this in turn provided them with a more focused time to connect with God.

The labyrinth was another practice that some participants found also helped them to engage with silence. Diana commented, “labyrinth was not something I am used to doing...I felt God spoke to different aspects” as she navigated the twists and turns of the path. Sally reported using labyrinths as a daily practice whilst on retreat and said that “I usually start walking it with something on my heart...whether it is the need to forgive somebody or an issue I’m wrestling with God. I walk in and breathe into God and then...I walk out being breathed out into the world.” Each participant identified different benefits to this practice. Diana identified a sense of joy when she sensed God speaking to her in the silence and solitude of walking the labyrinth.

Sally reported that the labyrinth facilitated her to “walk out having unburdened myself.” This practice benefited participants to be able to leave issues with God on retreat and feel that they did not have to carry them back into their pioneering contexts. The labyrinth provided space to walk in silence and pray.

A further access route into silence and solitude that participants used whilst on retreat was recording their thoughts and experiences in a journal. Journaling as a practice enabled some participants to allow themselves to be vulnerable before God without self-editing. Peter commented, “I’m sharing my heart like it’s a private practice to share my heart with the Lord...journaling practice is deeply personal.” Other ways participants used journaling was in assisting them to review and reflect as an anchor point. Jack commented on how he sees it as a “fruitful practice” where “I read back the last 3/6 months of journal entries” giving him the “sense of being in a flow of God’s mission or call on your life.” Participants indicated that reviewing and looking back on journals assisted them when it came to making decisions. Being able to trace thoughts or scriptures from previous retreats that had been journaled, assisted them to understand the direction they felt God leading them in. This practice was frequently referred to as something they did not do daily, but instead was more prolific when they stepped away on retreat. Interestingly the male participants appeared to resonate more strongly with this practice. The benefits of journaling that participants identified included feeling safe to be vulnerable when recording their

reflections. Being alone in silence participants reported that they felt the benefits subsequently in decision making and in reviewing their current calling.

A frequent benefit participants reported about silence and solitude on retreat was having the time to address their interior life. An awareness of neglecting their inner worlds whilst operating successfully in their external world revealed to them a need for silence and solitude. Caron felt that through the silence it was “really helpful sorting out some of the inner stuff...it is having the time to bring out all these thoughts and bring it before God.” Diana felt that silence on retreat allowed her to “press the pause button,” that in turn helped her to “re-centre” especially “when you have all these balls spinning in the air.” The necessity to take time out in silence benefited participants when they became aware that their pioneering ministry was influenced by what might be operating below the surface from within.

Lorraine referred to this as attending to her “backstage” that was affecting her “front stage ministry”.¹⁸ She valued being able to talk to God “expressing anger and whatever else there might be...” Creative arts was another way that participants accessed their interior worlds in silence. Sally commented, “I find art a good way of trying to express what comes up...having a dedicated space to really invest emotionally...seems to work.” Participants reported that creative arts assisted them to express how they were feeling and thus access their unspoken emotions.

The benefits that silence and solitude provided participants in having time to address their interior worlds caused them to reflect using words like renewal, soul holiday, feeling complete and a re-boot. Lorraine commented that in silence she had space to engage with her inner life, “So stuff can come to the surface which he (God) can deal with and he renews us.” Peter reflected that when he came home from retreat, “I feel like my soul has been on holiday” and “I feel more complete.” These benefits enabled participants to return to their pioneering contexts feeling a greater freedom as Caron reported, “Everything is better if it is switched off and switched on again, like a re-boot.”

¹⁸ Simon Walker, *Leading out of who you are* (Carlisle: Piquant Editions Ltd, 2007), p.27.

In this theme of silence and solitude we have seen that participants reported growing in this practice. The perceived benefits of the practice brought a sense of refuge which aided their well-being, facilitated joy, brought a sense of freedom from burdens, aided vulnerability, assisted decision making and importantly enabled them to access their interior worlds. All of these benefits identified by participants could enable them to think about what contributes to building a healthy practice as pioneers. There is some overlap with the next theme as participants also experienced silence and solitude and connection with God in other ways.

Prayer rhythms

This theme explains how participants engaged in rhythms of prayer through the daily offices, including morning and evening prayers. Participants who had engaged in longer retreats appreciated how the daily offices provided them with a structure to their prayer times and a sense of community. Lorraine felt the daily offices and doing it with others was something she found “very helpful.” Caron commented how she liked “morning prayer and evening prayer...it gives structure to the day. Something to hang everything else...on.” Sally agreed reflecting that it provided a “sense of continuity almost like a cloud of witnesses,” reminding her she was “not just part of a Church that’s global but also part of the church past and the future.” She was comforted by being part of prayer practices that have “been going on for centuries.” Some participants referenced the example of the prayer rhythms Jesus exercised in his ministry. Diane commented that the example of Jesus prompted her to engage in retreats. “Jesus ...got up early and drew aside to spend time on his own with his father.” Caron agreed stating, “Jesus went away by himself and prayed and this was important practice for him so is an important practice for us as well.” The perceived benefits participants experienced engaging in rhythms of prayer included, providing a sense of community and continuity, giving structure to their prayers and comfort.

Cultivating my spirituality

This theme details how participants understood why they needed to build in the practice of spiritual retreat. Here participants reflected on how they experienced a sense of being and not just doing as pioneers. Peter described how meeting God on retreat underlined the importance of being affirmed “not for what I do but who I am...retreat really renews the who I am factor.” For Caron likewise, retreats affirmed “who I truly am with God and to minister out of that is really important.” Sally commented how retreats were necessary for her, “like an MOT service where you are annually reviewing...every aspect.” These reflections point to the importance of formation which Jack picked up on when he reflected, “who is the person you need to cultivate, who is the person you need to form to be a fruitful well-balanced pioneer?” The answer to his question may well be found in how participants managed the challenges described in our next section.

Challenges

This section of the results will focus on the challenges that participants experienced firstly, coming into a time of retreat that is prior to arriving and this is explored over the themes ‘life is busy’ and ‘who am I?’ In addition, participants also reported experiencing challenges over the duration of the retreat and this is explored in the theme of ‘minds and hearts.’ The challenges exposed the struggle participants wrestled with. The struggle took various forms both externally and internally. Wrestling with the demons of shame and guilt as well as grappling with self-worth also came to the surface.

Life is busy

This theme explains how participants experienced a busy and demanding ministry as a pioneer and how that subsequent busyness impacted the practice of retreat.

One of the pressures pioneers contend with is justifying their position by the outcomes they produce. Peter commented that in his context it was “a lot about results and deliverables” so that retreat is seen as something that has “no instant value.” However, he faced the contradiction in his job description that specified long hours and that they wanted him to have “a healthy work life balance.” Caron spoke of frequent multi-tasking, “I think for pioneers we’re often juggling so many things” which is why “we need to get away from the busyness.” Diana also highlighted in her estate context “life gets busy as a pioneer doing new things but you need a time to rest.”

In addition, the contexts in which pioneers were situated in are often involved working with challenging people. They may have little or no faith and require intense support from the pioneer. Lorraine reflected that “in my pioneering because I work with young mothers many of them have significant issues.” Caron also said “we’re working closely, directly with people with a lot of complexity.” Likewise, pressure from those inside the church was something participants also reported. Lorraine commented, “you are really trying to listen to God you’re forging a new course. You’re going to upset some as they don’t understand.” Caron agreed “...and we’re taking flak from the institution...” Participants reported that these pressures can lead to extreme fatigue and anxiety without healthy practices like retreats in place. Peter admitted that if he did not spend focused time away, he said, “I feel tired and stressed a lot.” Similarly, Caron reported “like I’m really tired I know I need to get away when you get grumpy...the things that I was doing before are not life-giving as they were.” The extreme tiredness that participants carried with them into retreat often meant they needed to rest at the start of their time away. Jack said “falling asleep absolutely may be what you need and that’s ok.” Sally reported that at the beginning of a retreat, “quite often I am very tired and I just sleep...if my body needs to sleep, I will do that.” When asked what participants felt might happen if they did not attend to these pressures by going on retreat, Diana said “stress, sickness, anger, resentment, things just build up.” Peter agreed “maybe burnout...I’ve never experienced burnout but I think I’ve been pretty close...when I get really worn... I would use the word thin; I feel too stretched.”

The pace of life and not being able to fit in the practice of retreat is a challenge participants found in managing their schedules. Lorraine admitted, “This year I was supposed to have gone on one (retreat)...I can’t spare the time as I’m working and studying...I have not scheduled it in my diary.” The pressures of time management proved an ongoing struggle preventing participants from accessing retreats. Caron stated that what was difficult was “time and fitting it in the diary...I’m quite a last-minute person, you have to schedule it in advance. It’s just being organised.” Participants reported that with pressures on their time the practice of retreat had fluctuated. Jack spoke to this, “It is just making it a priority...practices need discipline...I think if they don’t go in the diary they don’t happen basically.” Participants also identified that they had to fit retreats around commitments to family and children as well.

Feeling an internal pressure about the right time to schedule a retreat also challenged participants who faced what seemed like more pressing demands on their time. The next themes address internal challenges participants reported.

Minds and hearts

This theme explains how participants on retreat had to meet the challenges of distracting thoughts and unmet expectations. Caron shared her struggle to “stop all that mind chatter,” something she experienced during times of silence on retreat. Lorraine also battled with the feeling of coming in with a cluttered head and how retreat enabled her to declutter. Carrying the responsibilities of being a pioneer and busy mum Diana reported that her mind “is constantly on and running around and thinking about all the calendar events to be at.” A further distraction that challenged participants was having to have their phones switched on during retreat due to family commitments. Jack in his pioneer ministry held a number of different roles and he commented how “sometimes it feels like my mind is fragmented.”

In addition to busy minds participants experienced disappointment due to unmet expectations of how they would engage with God or of the retreat itself.

Lorraine talked about going to a particular retreat with high expectations “this was a place God was going to do incredible works...” but left “feeling disappointed because nothing dramatic happened.” Caron also shared “I’ve been on a couple of retreats where I haven’t felt what I am looking for...it is really disappointing...because I really needed to find God.” Participants viewed retreats as a time in which they invested to make important decisions about their futures. However, Caron commented “I was bringing to God about discernment regarding ordination training to be honest I didn’t get any direct answer.” She spoke about coming to retreat with questions but said “he never answers...retreat doesn’t seem to be a place for me to hear those decisions.” Retreat was a place that revealed identity issues as discussed next.

Who Am I?

This theme groups together a number of challenges that link in some way to identity and how participants view themselves. It touches on a sense of self-worth and value, self-criticism and operating from a sense of ‘should’ or ‘ought.’ How participants viewed themselves influenced how they interacted with the practice of retreat. Perhaps unconsciously, a lower sense of self-worth caused participants to struggle to give priority to building retreat in as a healthy practice. Likewise, participants who wrestled with a higher sense of guilt also struggled to prioritize scheduling retreats. Lorraine reflected “I’m not that good remembering to look after myself...I’m not good at scheduling...I’m still learning self-care.” Peter acknowledged that “over the years it (retreat) was lacking in my practice.” Sally reflected women who are busy mums, wives, daughters “tend to put other people’s needs before our own.” Perhaps on retreat, she reflected that “God is encouraging us to think about how we look after ourselves.” Alongside the challenge of self-worth participants also revealed the battle of operating from a sense of ‘should’ or ‘ought.’ Caron revealed “I’m often beating myself up...I should be doing this better...” on retreat “I have tried to achieve too much.” She went on to reflect “we are not trying to achieve anything on retreat.”

Jack also contemplated that some of his greatest challenges on retreat is “unlearning some stuff from my conservative Catholic beginnings that said you must do this, you must do that.” Sally talked about an identity issue that she thought would come up if time for going on retreats was not invested. “...if we are determined to be Godly in our pioneering, we have to put in the spiritual practices which deal with our ego... the danger of not doing that is so huge.” She reflected how for leaders “ego is a deadly trap,” and how not keeping it in check “brings the church...into disrepute.”

During the practice of silence participants reported that issues they may have buried began to rise to the surface. In the past Sally recounted how she had struggled with “issues of shame” and that for a long time she had a “critical voice in my head.”

These issues had affected her interaction with silence and hearing God as she became attuned to hearing “my own inner critic.” Positively for Sally she now finds silence a joy as she reported, “I don’t have to listen to that voice anymore.”

Participants also wrestled with a sense of guilt for taking time out to go on retreat. Peter reported “I always feel ... guilt before I do... an away day retreat by myself. I feel guilty because there is so much to do.” Other participants felt guilt in connection to their relationships. Diana said “I might feel guilty leaving my husband or my work colleagues.” Lorraine felt guilty with regard to the cost of retreat and shared a sense of reluctance leaving her husband due to shared job responsibilities.

Conclusion

The practices gave shape to how participants experienced retreats and importantly provided pathways for them to connect with God. Whilst on retreat participants explored practices that were unfamiliar to them and some of these were only used whilst they were away on retreat. Practices were often combined, for example silence and solitude with journaling. Participants all recorded benefiting in different ways when engaging with these exercises.

The benefits of being on retreat provided participants refuge from the pressures of pioneering, a sense of feeling part of a larger family, of finding accompaniment and receiving support. An important benefit participants reported was having time to pay attention to their interior life. Time for reflection gave the additional benefit of assisting participants in decision making. Perhaps the most important benefit was having time to connect with God. This was underlined by one of the participants who said, "I just really felt that God was like very personal...it felt very much like an encounter with God in that place." This helped participants to put challenging aspects of their ministry and personhood into a wider story, the story of having friendship with God and not being alone. As well as benefits the participants also reported challenges they experienced.

The challenges participants faced both before and during retreat came in the form of external pressures that could be linked to the pace of life, the demanding contexts they worked in and the constant task of time management. But participants also reported internal pressures linked to a sense of identity, struggling with a busy mind and negotiating disappointment. The challenges reveal a struggle participants faced whilst on retreat that indicate retreats are not to be confused with vacation. They were led to wrestle with demons of shame and guilt. In the silence they did battle with condemnation, doubt and self-criticism. The challenges provided participants with the opportunity to think more deeply about who they were as practitioners. Being on retreat gave space to explore the 'who' questions that would benefit participants in developing a healthy rhythm for pioneering ministry.

Discussion

Summary of findings

I began by asking how do pioneers experience spiritual retreats. What I discovered was the different spiritual practices that participants used whilst away on retreat and how this led them to encounter the presence of God. I then sought to understand what were the benefits and challenges that they encountered? Over seven themes I identified numerous benefits that participants reported and the key challenges that they struggled with. Participants described how retreats enabled them to reflect on being not just doing, on contemplation in the midst of engagement and on relationship with God not just working for God. In this discussion section I begin with the theme Life is busy, to help understand the context of the demanding pioneering ministries participants have and how this is a key challenge to engaging with the practice of retreat. This is followed by discussing the theme of Encounter which really sums up the main purpose participants invested time in taking a retreat. Lastly, I discuss Silence and Solitude which were central practices that participants used to engage with whilst on retreat. I will situate each of these themes in existing literature. I will also consider the implications for this research, consider the limitations of the study and conclude with some recommendations from my research.

Life Is Busy

The participants are pioneers who minister in often demanding contexts. Some live and work on housing estates, some are parents as well as full-time pioneers, many minister to people with complex needs and a number of them juggle more than one ministerial role. Pioneers are often expected to justify their role by producing clear deliverables and meeting funding expectations. This is the context that challenges their capacity to build in spiritual retreats as a part of a healthy pioneer ministry. In addition, the practice of spiritual retreat is not yet a practice which is mainstream in the church and still carries some misunderstanding as to its purpose.

The prevailing culture of productivity and efficiency, found inside and outside the church, challenges those who intentionally seek to retreat to 'waste time' with God. Yet this 'wasting time' prevents what Sanford claims those involved in ministry work are particularly susceptible to, the problem of burnout.¹⁹ Likewise Doolittle also supports this.²⁰ There were four main areas that contributed to the stress participants identified that caused them to struggle to schedule regular retreats these were: time management, the intensity of the work, feeling misunderstood and tiredness.

There were a number of factors that contributed to making time management an ongoing pressure for participants. Like many in ministry these include a multiplicity of roles, unsocial work schedules where it is difficult to balance work and self-care activities and blurred boundaries between church and home.²¹ Struggling to prioritise events in their diaries left participants without space for retreats. This aligns with Swenson²² and Cowley²³ who both agree that without establishing effective priorities, overloading will continue to fill up our schedules and keep us captive. The requirement to create margins around time is what is deeply needed. Struggling to manage time effectively is not helped by the next area of stress.

The intensity of the work that our participants as pioneers undertake is often due to their ministry among people with complex needs and significant issues. A number of the participants pioneered on housing estates serving among largely unchurched people. Participants in these contexts and others were prone to being drained of energy through their high availability to people in need. This is supported by Sanford who argues:

*“One hardly uses one’s physical energy in working with...people, but mentally and spiritually one becomes depleted.”*²⁴

¹⁹ John Sanford, *Ministry Burnout* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982), p.5.

²⁰ Benjamin Doolittle, 'The Impact of Behaviours upon Burnout Among Parish-Based Clergy', *Journal of Religion and Health*, 49.1 (2010), 88-95 (p.89).

²¹ Chelsea Gill, <

https://pure.bond.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/31605185/AM_Exploring_the_restorative_benefits_of_spiritual_retreats.pdf > [accessed 28 February 2023].

²² Richard Swenson, *Margin* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2004), p.65.

²³ Ian Cowley, *The Contemplative Minister* (Abingdon: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2015), p.45.

²⁴ Sanford, p.9.

Robbins and Francis also support this in their study where 46% of the clergy women they interviewed felt drained by their roles.²⁵ The well of resources the pioneer has available to them is prone to run dry given the constant demand on their availability. The next area participants experienced pressure came from within the church.

The nature of pioneering work which participants engaged with has been described as the task of boundary-breaking: to reach those whose feelings, experience or worldview has excluded them from the possibility of taking part in a faith community.²⁶ This task of boundary-breaking often brings the pioneer into a place of misunderstanding from those who already belong to the church. Participants shared their experiences of being misunderstood by those who didn't like the new initiatives they were attempting to introduce. This aligns with Sanford who likewise stated that it takes energy to contend with rejection, criticism or hostility from those with different expectations of the ministering person.²⁷ Pioneers must learn how to handle the opposition they face from those they expected to support them. The challenges of managing time, the intensity of the work and misunderstanding from within the church all contributed to the final area of stress for participants.

Extreme tiredness surfaced in participants who described the effects as: feeling grumpy, their ministry as not life-giving, stress, sickness, anger and resentment building up, feeling worn and too stretched. This is consistent with Barton who references two types of tiredness, good tired and dangerous tired.²⁸ Dangerous levels of exhaustion usually accumulate over a longer period of time in which we are consistently living beyond human limits.²⁹ A number of participants reflected that at the start of taking a retreat they simply needed to sleep. If we situate this theme of Life is busy theologically, we should keep two opposite truths in tension. The first truth is, as Christians we should be productive with our time to be 'poured out' as in Philippians 2:17 and we no longer claim our time as our own but we work 'night and day, labouring and toiling' as in 2 Thessalonians 3:8.³⁰ But the second truth is that we

²⁵ Mandy Robbins and Leslie Francis, 'Work-related psychological health and psychological type among church of England clergywomen', *Review of Religious Research*, 52.1 (2010), 57-71 (p.68).

²⁶ Jonny Baker and Cathy Ross, *Pioneering Spirituality* (London: Canterbury Press, 2015) p.88.

²⁷ Sanford, p.8.

²⁸ Barton, *Invitation to Retreat*, p.24.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Tim Chester, *The Busy Christian's guide to Busyness* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2006), p.169.

find rest in our busyness, in the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:28, 'Come to me...and I will give you rest.'³¹

There is a time to work and a time to rest. In the midst of living busy lives participants on retreat reflected on the 'what', 'how' and 'why' of their ministries, but lying beneath these questions is the deeper question of 'who is the self that practices?'³²

This was often articulated by participants that their pioneering was 'not what I do but who I am and how do I cultivate a well-balanced pioneer?' The 'who' question can assist the pioneer to consider their uniqueness and how that ultimately shapes their ministry. The busyness of life is a clear challenge that participants found to scheduling retreats as a consistent rhythm, but it also pre-empted a strong sense in them of 'I am more than what I do.' When participants overcame this key challenge the benefits they discovered is in our next theme.

Encounter

If we want to understand why participants invested in the practice of retreat this theme leads us to understand their key reason, the need to encounter and experience connection with God. From the experiences participants shared, it is possible to conclude that setting aside time and giving intentional space to be with God facilitates the opportunity for encountering the Spirit's presence. In support of this conclusion, we draw on the Letter to the Hebrews which gives us the reason that Christ died which was to bring us to God.³³ God is no longer distant and far-off, but rather we are urged to draw near to God and to enter in the sanctuary with confidence in Hebrews 10:22. Likewise we see this exaltation to draw near to God in James 4:8 with the promise that God will draw near to us. In discussing this theme, we will consider the character of the God participants met, how and why the natural

³¹ Ibid, p.171.

³² Cheryl Hunt, 'Doing Reflective Practice and Understanding Spirituality as a Way of Being: Implications for Professional and Transformative Practice', *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, 12.2 (2022), p.191.

³³ Raymond Brown, *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of Hebrews* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), p19.

world facilitated connection, the role of spiritual accompaniment and finally the reality of disappointment.

The participants all shared an underlying assumption that God is a God who wants to be encountered and is one who seeks friendship with those who follow him. The participants held an image of God that was relational. This aligns with Horsfall who claims that what makes seeking God attainable is the initiative lies with God, it is not that we find God but of our being found by him.³⁴ This is profoundly underscored by Verney:

*“This is the nature of the encounter, not that I am stumbling towards Abba Father, but that the Abba Father is running towards me...it is not that I am contemplating the divine love, but that divine love is contemplating me.”*³⁵

Why was having this relational image of God important to the participants? The nature of their pioneering ministry at times brought with it a sense of aloneness in being misunderstood, of not fitting in and experiencing tension holding a different vision from the majority. When participants could frame their pioneering ministry in a wider story, the story of having friendship with God, this enabled resilience for the difficult challenges of pioneering because they knew they were not alone.

Encounters with God were frequently experienced by being outdoors in the natural world. All participants testified to a strong connection to God either by walking in or by being outdoors contemplating creation. Theologically we may sit these experiences in the instruction of Jesus in Matthew 6 who told the disciples to consider the lilies and think about the grass of the field. Magdalen argues that Jesus is not suggesting a peremptory glance, but a long, feasting look that allows for a discovery of truth by gazing and wondering.³⁶ Likewise, in Psalm 19 we are told the heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands. The participants shared how components such as leaves, birds, rainbows, were used in

³⁴ Tony Horsfall, *Rhythms of Grace: Finding intimacy with God in a busy life* (Abingdon: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2012), p.124.

³⁵ Stephen Verney, *Into the New Age* (London: Fontana, 1976), p.91.

³⁶ Horsfall, p.113.

different ways by God to speak to them. German theologian Jurgen Moltmann has called the Spirit “the unspeakable closeness of God” in creation.³⁷ Robinson commenting on Moltmann, points out that the life-giving Spirit of God who is ever-present in creation, enables these important moments of encounter that are vital to our spiritual formation.³⁸ One of the key benefits identified by participants through encountering God in creation was a release of creativity. Why is this important for pioneers to experience? It is because the gift that pioneers bring is one that usually sees or imagines something different from business as usual in the church and it is critical to pay attention to what God is doing.³⁹ In addition to creativity, encountering God in nature enabled participants to determine what was most important to them in their ministries, namely coming closer to God. This desire for closeness with God went beyond the boundaries of the retreat and remained with them even in the busyness of pioneering. This is consistent with Zsolnai who argues that spiritual experiences will often make meaningful and lasting change in the person’s life and functioning.⁴⁰

Equally important to being in nature participants also reported the value of having spiritual accompaniment which helped them to encounter God whilst on retreat. This aligns historically where spiritual accompaniment has played a significant role in the life of leaders, an example of which is recorded by the Venerable Bede in the life of Abbess Hilda.

*“Bishop Aidan, and others of the religious that knew her, frequently visited her and loved her heartily, and diligently instructed her...”*⁴¹

Participants perceived that they encountered God through spiritual accompaniment by expecting to hear God speak through that person. However, Gilley argues against this proposing that the spiritual director has no pipeline to God and cannot unravel the supposed direction from God, any more than those who are seeking

³⁷ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), p.10.

³⁸ Timothy Robinson, ‘The Role of Nature in Spiritual Formation’, *Leaven*, 22.1 (2014), 10-14 (p.11).

³⁹ Jonny Baker and Cathy Ross, *Imagining Mission With John V. Taylor* (London: SCM Press, 2020), p.25.

⁴⁰ Laszlo Zsolnai, ‘Spirituality, religion and the functioning of the economy’, *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, 12.1 (2022), 62-67 (p.63).

⁴¹ Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of: Chapter XXIII Of the life and death of the Abbess Hilda [614-680 A.D.], <<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/bede/history.v.iv.xxiii.html>> [accessed 13 February 2023].

help.⁴² Counteracting Gilley, Greenaway-Clarke maintains that spiritual directors encourage directees to listen to God for themselves, thus eliminating the director's role as a middleman.⁴³ Our participants confirmed the latter view. Surprisingly the practice of confession with a retreat guide, was a way in which participants encountered God through healing. This result was surprising given that participants did not belong to a church which practiced confession privately with a priest. However, this aligns with Jones, Wainwright and Yarnold who maintain:

*"...sacramental confession expresses and so strengthens each individual...not only to remit sin...but as a sacrament of healing and deliverance for the emotional sickness which hamper...Christians in their discipleship."*⁴⁴

Alongside moments of deep intimacy with God, participants also experienced disappointment and unmet expectations about how God might speak to them. One of the underlying assumptions sitting beneath this disappointment is that retreat is a place where God must encounter retreatants in an extraordinary or dramatic way. It may also reveal that seeking God in the ordinary, mundane day to day life had perhaps become dry and retreat merely exposes the desert within. Regardless of these assumptions the disappointment felt was real to our participants. This experience of disappointment aligns with Barton who points out:

*"...the fear of not getting what our heart longs for has led us to develop and unconscious pattern of distancing ourselves from our desire in order to avoid the pain of its lack of fulfilment."*⁴⁵

Disappointment is also captured in the book of Psalms. The Psalmist expresses this in Psalm 13, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" The psychologist Zahl presents the view that research confirms the tendency to see God as an attachment

⁴² Dr Gary Gilley, The dangers of spiritual formation: fasting and spiritual direction, < <https://thenarrowingpath.com/2013/10/16/the-dangers-of-spiritual-formation-part-iv-fasting-and-spiritual-direction/> > [accessed 28 March 2023].

⁴³ Kristy Greenaway-Clarke, 'What do we understand by the ministry of spiritual direction?', *The Way*, 60.4 (2021), 74-86 (p.82).
⁴⁴ *The Study*, p.569.

⁴⁵ Ruth Haley Barton, *Invitation To Solitude and Silence* (London: SPCK, 2021), p.29.

figure, that when some Christians perceive God to be distant or unresponsive, this can generate anxiety about abandonment.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, disappointment experienced on retreat may well provide the opportunity to explore with honesty the true state of the interior life which was aided by the next practice.

Silence and Solitude

This practice helped to shape the posture of participants towards pioneering. Silence and solitude provide a way for the pioneer to step back from all that was visible and measurable into the hidden vulnerability of themselves before God.⁴⁷ Consistent with the literature our participants described a tension they faced to engage with this practice, the continual challenge “to keep a balance in the doing/being and contemplation/action aspects of life and work.”⁴⁸ Participants spoke of being on a journey with silence and solitude and this idea expresses the thought that as a spiritual practice they wished to develop and grow more in it. This understanding is captured by Barton⁴⁹ and Wilkes⁵⁰ who maintain that time away on retreat in silence develops a growing attunement to the presence of God and ourselves. The journey for participants also involved the struggle of encountering distractions when they sought to still their minds in the silence. The challenges of “mind chatter” and of their minds racing ahead to future events were also obstacles they contended with.

Attunement and hearing God’s voice was one of the key benefits recorded in the practice of silence and solitude by our participants. Silence was not itself the aim, rather it was to experience connection with the presence of God as the main purpose being sought. Participants reported they engaged with God’s presence using words like sharing with God, wrestling with God, receiving, reconnecting and listening. These words expressed are relational words and articulate a sense of dependency

⁴⁶ Bonnie Poon Zahl, *Attachment Theory and your Relationship with God*, < <https://mbird.com/psychology/attachment-theory-and-your-relationship-with-god/> > [accessed 16 February 2023].

⁴⁷ Jonny Baker and Cathy Ross, *Pioneering Spirituality* (London: Canterbury Press, 2015), p.11.

⁴⁸ Steven Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2009), p.170.

⁴⁹ Barton, *Invitation*, p.84.

⁵⁰ Paul Wilkes, *Beyond the Walls: Monastic Wisdom* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), p.14.

that practicing solitude helps to foster in the participant's relationship with God. This aligns with Smith who observes that entering God's presence is "not for a "top up" refueling to then leave self-sufficient, but rather the biblical vision is one of co-abiding presence and participation, I in you and you in me."⁵¹ Smith's thoughts capture the important message of John chapter 15 that of having a continuing dependence of abiding in the living Saviour.⁵² In this passage Jesus labours the importance of abiding in him for the capacity to be fruitful.

If Silence and solitude facilitate the opportunity to encounter God, they also facilitate the opportunity to encounter our real selves and participants expressed this was an important benefit this practice played. This aligns with Jones, Wainwright and Yarnold in their understanding of retreat that is not an escape into unreality, but the very opposite.⁵³ It is a time for facing the truth and for coming to grips with the realities of the retreatant's life.⁵⁴ However, Plummer contradicts this by arguing that times of solitude and silence for the Christian are not for a mental or emotional boost.⁵⁵ But Adams agrees with Jones, Wainwright and Yarnold arguing that the journey to knowing God must include the discipline of coming to know yourself and it is in silence that the risky journey begins.⁵⁶ The role that silence and solitude played for participants was described as pressing the 'pause button' and 're-centering' themselves. This is supported by Nouwen who expressed:

*"Through contemplative prayer we can keep ourselves from being pulled from one urgent issue to another and from becoming strangers to our own heart and God's heart."*⁵⁷

Nouwen is highlighting how it is possible to become estranged from your heart, but the power of contemplative prayer creates space for the interior life to be examined.

⁵¹ James K.A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), p.152.

⁵² Bruce Milne, *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of John* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), p.221.

⁵³ Jones, Wainwright and Yarnold, p.580.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Robert Plummer, 'Are the spiritual disciplines of "Silence and Solitude" really Biblical?', *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care*, 2.1 (2009), 101-112 (p.112).

⁵⁶ Ian Adams, *Cave, Refectory, Road: monastic rhythms for contemporary living* (London: Canterbury Press, 2010), p.18.

⁵⁷ Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2002), p.43.

Attending to the interior life appeared to be an important strategy to ensure integrity in their external ministries, expressed by one participant as their backstage and frontstage. The logic that informs this comment is that whilst exterior ministry may look successful the deeper reality may tell a different story. This idea is found in the story in 1 Samuel 16:7, when God reveals how his selection of Israel's next King is not to look at the outward appearance but to look beyond the exterior into the heart. It may be possible to present an outwardly busy pioneering ministry whilst ignoring the inner issues of the heart. Participants made the link that times of silence was associated with the opportunity for issues which had previously been suppressed to rise to the surface. This is consistent with Swan who likened the interior life as an inner desert and that the inner desert is the place of ongoing interior transformation, where idols and the false self are wrestled with.⁵⁸ Interestingly it was not the cognitive benefits but the opportunity to attend to heart issues that silence and solitude provided. The silence gave participants space to process emotional clutter. These experiences echo Barton who concludes that silence assists us to drop beneath the superficiality of mental constructs to a deeper place of the heart and this maybe a wordless place.⁵⁹ However, Rosscup contradicts the value Barton places on silence arguing that silence is only a very limited component of healthy prayer.⁶⁰ But Sittser agrees with Barton and connects times of silence to a place beyond intellect that the soul plunges into and is speechless.⁶¹ Silence and solitude was an extremely important practice to participants on retreat but they often faced difficulties practicing this.

Implications

The findings in this paper support and speak to the existing field of research into spiritual retreats and the positive benefits they deliver for those in frontline ministry. Whilst previous research has focused mainly on clergy, these results contribute to a clearer understanding of those specifically undertaking pioneering ministry who

⁵⁸ Laura Swan, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers* (New York: Paulist Press, 2022), p.180.

⁵⁹ Barton, *Invitation To Solitude*, p.54.

⁶⁰ James Rosscup, 'Review: Invitation to Solitude and Silence,' *The Master's Seminary Journal*, 16.2 (2005), 325-327 (p.326).

⁶¹ Gerald Sittser, *Water from a Deep Well* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), p.168.

reported the benefits of this practice. This is explored in the Practices and Benefits section of this paper. A further key contribution of the findings demonstrated what healthy practice is among pioneers and may assist in the training of new pioneers. This was presented in the Discussion section in Encounter and Silence and Solitude. Alongside the contribution to practice a contribution is made to the theory of pioneering spirituality and the importance of exploring 'who is the self that practices?'⁶² For pioneers going forward the importance of having a correct theological understanding of knowing who they are in Christ and how they are loved unconditionally, prevents them from merely deriving identity from their activism. Out of a strong sense of identity in Christ the practice of spiritual retreat ceases to be a task in a busy schedule but rather an expression of who they are. The implication of this is that I am more likely to find time for retreat if I understand who I am.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study the first of which is the sample size of the group interviewed which was small and did not capture the thoughts of non-Western cultures, for example African or Asian voices. A further limitation with this study is that it did not take into account which types of retreats most benefited the participants. However, despite these limitations the results are nonetheless valid for the purposes of addressing my research question.

Recommendations

Avenues for further research could include sampling pioneers from African, Asian and other indigenous cultures to learn how spiritual retreats are practiced in a non-Western context. Identifying how cultures operate at a different pace of life may determine the place retreat plays in what enables healthy pioneer practice. In my research participants reported how they had "grown into silence." It was for them a developing practice. Further studies could at a later date revisit the participants in

⁶² Hunt, p.191.

this study to explore how they have grown in this practice. Beyond the scope of this research but an important area for future research is how the effects of retreats impact a pioneer's leadership role.

Jesus: A Time to Withdraw

Introduction

In this chapter I will set out to demonstrate how the practice of spiritual retreat can be rooted in the pattern of withdrawal to pray as Jesus exhibited in the Gospels. Whilst the modern concept of retreat cannot be overlaid directly on to Jesus' ministry, it is possible to make important connections from his ministry to retreat today. Through these connections we will establish why Jesus sought time away from the vast crowds that pursued him and even at times from the disciples who followed him. To explore this, I will use a framework that Brother Ramon described as the four levels of retreat that help to explain why Jesus withdrew to solitary places.⁶³ This framework was selected to enable a detailed exploration of Jesus' pattern of withdrawal and also because it facilitates connections to the participants' practices recorded earlier. It is to be acknowledged that connections to retreat can be found elsewhere in scripture, but for my purposes I have chosen to focus on the Gospels.

A cursory reading of the Gospels could lead us to the conclusion that Jesus was an activist by his busy schedule of preaching and teaching, healing the sick and the vast crowds of people he was constantly surrounded by. However, the frequency on the part of the Gospel writers to Jesus' withdrawal into solitude, reveal their intentionality to show that prayer was a cornerstone of his ministry.⁶⁴ In Matthew 14:23 for example we read, "he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray," and in Luke 9:18 "Once when Jesus was praying in private..." Horsfall maintains:

*"These interludes of aloneness were integral to the way he lived and crucial to the maintenance of his relationship with the Father."*⁶⁵

However, some difference of opinion can be found as to what purpose Jesus uses solitude. Dunn argues that Jesus' natural response to crisis was to seek God alone

⁶³ Brother Ramon SSF, *Deeper into God* (Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1987) p.45.

⁶⁴ Laszlo Gallusz, *The Seven Prayers of Jesus* (London: InterVarsity Press, 2017), p.15.

⁶⁵ Horsfall, p.48.

in prayer,⁶⁶ but Magdalen refutes this by stating his need for solitude was not crisis orientated.⁶⁷ To unpack the purposes I will use the framework detailed earlier and seek to relate this to the practice of spiritual retreat.

4 levels of Retreat: A Framework

Ramon identified the four levels of retreat as follows: first to abide with the Father, second for refreshment, third for guidance and direction and fourth for spiritual combat.⁶⁸ I will explore each one through scriptures, relevant literature and relate it to the experiences recorded by our participants.

Abiding with the Father

Jesus demonstrates his close and intimate communion with the Father through his teaching on prayer, at key moments and in the fruit of intimacy he reveals. In Luke 11:2 Jesus when teaching his disciples to pray said, “When you pray, say Father...” He addresses this prayer to his ‘abba’ or Father, which opens a window on the secret to his own prayer life, namely that prayer involves a loving, trusting relationship with God.⁶⁹ If we relate this first reason back to our participants, we saw that one of the key benefits they recorded when on retreat was encountering God assisting them to frame their story in the wider story of friendship with God. Just as Jesus spent time abiding with the Father, participants reported the benefits of feeling a closeness to God which on retreat eased the loneliness of pioneering. Jesus not only teaches but demonstrates his own use of the Aramaic ‘abba’ in his prayers. In Luke 10:21, in a thanksgiving prayer Jesus addresses God as Father twice. In verse 22 Jesus enjoys a most intimate relationship of shared knowledge with the Father confirming his Sonship.⁷⁰ It is in John’s Gospel that we hear Jesus speak of the fruit of abiding with his Father. Jesus declares his assurance he is never alone in John 8:16 “I am not alone; I stand with the Father.” He reveals a confidence that he is

⁶⁶ James Dunn, ‘Prayer’, in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. by Joel Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), pp. 617-625 (p.618).

⁶⁷ Margaret Magdalen, *Jesus Man of Prayer* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991), p.39.

⁶⁸ Ramon, p.45.

⁶⁹ Magdalen, p.62.

⁷⁰ Geir Holmas, *Prayer and Vindication in Luke-Acts* (London: T&T Clark International, 2011), p.99.

loved in John 17:24 “Father...you loved me before the creation of the world.”

Runcorn suggests that:

*“In those lonely places the deep springs of the Spirit’s life renewed him...and the Father’s love inspired him.”*⁷¹

Jesus withdrew to abide in the Father’s love and we see the fruit of this in his confidence that he is loved and never alone. Our participants also sought retreat for the next reason that Jesus sought to withdraw.

Refreshment

Jesus in his humanity experienced physical tiredness, emotional sadness and mental fatigue. As I examine the next reason Jesus sought to withdraw, we will see how at key times he needed refreshment in the midst of the busy demands of his ministry. On hearing about the death of John the Baptist in Matthew 14:13 we read Jesus “withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.” Olea suggests that this passage indicates John’s death truly affected Jesus.⁷² Jesus knew he needed sometime in solitude to reflect on his grief for John. In Mark’s Gospel directly following the death of John, Jesus in 6:31 teaches his disciples “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.” Jesus takes his disciples to a solitary place to refresh. The pressures from the crowds, the unending needs of the sick to be healed did not drive Jesus and nor did his increasing popularity. Horsfall points out that:

*“The need to be needed is very great and is deeply motivational. Success once achieved, is not something that we easily risk losing. It can seem more prudent to work than to rest.”*⁷³

⁷¹ David Runcorn, *Space for God* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 1990), p.4.

⁷² Vincent Olea, ‘Are you the One who is to come? Examining the relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist’, *Journal of Theta, Alpha, Kappa*, 17.1 (1993), 4-20 (p.18).

⁷³ Horsfall, p.54.

This posture is contrasted by Luke in 5:16 “Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.” Here Jesus is not motivated by meeting the maximum number of needs and neither is he seen holding tightly to his success. His decision to withdraw indicates the importance of refreshment when the demands of ministry are significant.

The participants in this study are all busy pioneers who work in demanding contexts with many pressures on their schedules and who shared that at times they felt stressed and tired. The role that spiritual retreats played in their lives was to provide a refuge of rest and through solitude prayerful reflection away from their contexts. Retreats enabled participants to practice Mark 6:31 “come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.” Participants also sought wisdom in the next level of retreat.

Guidance and Direction

In John 4:34 Jesus said, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me...” and in John 8:28 he says, “...I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me.” These words of Jesus provide a backdrop to the next reason he sought to withdraw and pray. They speak of one who surrendered himself to the will of God and demonstrate his dependence on hearing direction from the Father. Wright argues that Jesus prays before the significant events in his life, his prayers inviting the work of God to drive forward God’s mission.⁷⁴ In Luke 6:12 Jesus went to the mountainside to pray and there he spent the entire night in prayer when he returned, he chose his twelve disciples. Bovon points out that Luke uses the unique expression “in prayer with God” and this expresses not only Jesus’ supplication but also his silence, the listening, and the answer of God.⁷⁵ Important decisions were made by Jesus in the context of prayer and solitude.

Success and popularity in his ministry were not compasses for determining where Jesus should direct his focus. We read in Mark 1:35,36 “while it was still dark, Jesus

⁷⁴ Catherine Wright, *Spiritual Practices of Jesus* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2020), Google ebook chapter 8.

⁷⁵ Francois Bovon, *Luke 2* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), p.209.

got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” When the disciples eventually find him, they exclaim, “Everyone is looking for you!” Bock argues that Jesus is portrayed as seeking time with God, rather than fanning his fame.⁷⁶ The crowds are seeking Jesus for the healings and exorcisms. But Jesus having just been in prayer surprises the disciples in Mark 1:38 by saying “Let us go somewhere else...” Jesus demonstrates that hearing from the Father determines the forward motion of the kingdom, not simply the needs of the crowd.

Guidance from God came to the participants in this study through the practices of silence, journaling and spiritual direction whilst on retreat. Retreat acted like a pause button from which to come away from their busy contexts and determine with God what their next steps might be. Jesus is seen at times in his ministry seeking out the will of his Father. He intentionally builds space away from the crowds to hear from the Father to guide his way ahead.

Spiritual Warfare

The fourth level of retreat involves Jesus in prayer combating the spiritual powers. A fierce example of this is in the garden of Gethsemane, meaning oil press, where Jesus prayed in lonely anguish before his arrest.⁷⁷ In the Markan account of 14:32-42 powerful verbs are used of Jesus’ condition, deeply distressed, troubled, overwhelmed with sorrow and through these shines a light into the intimate prayer life of Jesus.⁷⁸ Jesus uses the intimate language of Abba, to address his Father in his prayer, this is poignant given the immense darkness of the situation. The three prayers of Jesus in Gethsemane echo back to the beginning of his ministry in Matthew 4:1-11 when he successfully underwent three temptations, both these episodes achieved a similar victory against the forces of evil.⁷⁹ Luke is interested in portraying this scene as a cosmic battle in 22:39-46. This is evident in his use of *peirasmōs* in verses 40 and 46 a term denoting struggle with Satan and in his

⁷⁶ Darrell Bock, *Luke Volume 1&2* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), Google ebook chapter 3.

⁷⁷ Joel Green, ‘Gethsemane’, in *Dictionary of Jesus*, pp. 265-268 (p.265).

⁷⁸ Donald English, *The Message of Mark* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), p.220.

⁷⁹ Gallusz, p.119.

reference to angelic assistance.⁸⁰ Holmas agrees with this, maintaining that Jesus is presented by Luke as a spiritual athlete who engages with strenuous effort in a spiritual combat through prayer.⁸¹ Finally, Luke highlights Jesus' struggle in prayer as the turning point of the passion narrative, as it is here that Jesus gains the fortitude to embrace his mission and God's will.⁸² In the accounts of Jesus' withdrawal we see both the overt and covert assaults of Satan, but Jesus demonstrates how he overcame the assaults by drawing aside to pray.

The participants in this study experienced spiritual warfare in more subtle forms. The prevailing culture of today even in ministry is not particularly conducive to slowing down, pausing and stepping away from busyness to pray. The participants all battled to even find time in their demanding schedules to withdraw away to retreat. As Jesus struggled with feeling distressed and troubled, participants too had to wrestle with guilt, tiredness and the expectations of others in the church. However, the victory for the participants was validated in the persistence to overcome these challenges. What is clear from the participants experience is that to pursue healthy pioneer practice, participants at times had to swim against the tide of cultural norms.

Conclusion

In this chapter I set out to demonstrate that Jesus modelled a life of withdrawal in the midst of busy ministry through the four levels of retreat. Using the Gospel accounts, we looked at how they frequently shine a light on Jesus withdrawing to pray. What we see in the ministry of Jesus is opposition in different forms, but the clear message is such opposition must be met by a robust prayer life. The implications from this study to pioneers must be that if Jesus needed time alone so must we, if the secret of effectiveness in ministry is communion with the Father, we also need this. If Jesus could stop and rest, so can we.⁸³ In a culture which values productivity and busyness the pioneer must seek to implement the rhythms of engagement and withdrawal

⁸⁰ Joel Green, Gethsemane, pp. 265-268 (p.267).

⁸¹ Holmas, p.108.

⁸² Wright, chapter 7.

⁸³ Horsfall, p.52.

Jesus so clearly models. We also see the significance of the practice of withdrawal in our next chapter.

Time In The Desert

Introduction

The practice of retreat in addition to scripture finds its roots in the lives of the desert mothers and fathers that emerged in the third and fourth centuries. These desert saints were ordinary Christians living in solitude or in early monastic communities in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine and Syria. Central to their practice was a simple lifestyle of interior silence and unceasing prayer to seek communion with God. They resisted the ways of the world to accept lives of celibacy, labour, fasting, prayer and poverty.⁸⁴ In order to explore this vast topic, it will be necessary to focus on just a few key themes that we also saw weaved throughout the findings of our participants. The themes I have selected are silence and solitude together with spiritual direction, they were selected because they feature prominently in our participants experience of retreat and are key in the spirituality of the desert. For each theme I will again ask how did the desert saints experience the practice and what were the benefits and challenges they encountered. I will also seek points of connection from these early desert believers to our participants.

Silence

“It is good to practice contemplative quiet: a wise person leads a life of quiet contemplation.” Amma Theodora⁸⁵

A central practice of those who retreated to the desert was silence, but as we will see the silence itself was layered⁸⁶ and for the ammas and abbas of the desert they had to learn to discern the presence of God in those layers. What did the desert saints mean by silence? An important feature of the inner disposition of the desert saints was stillness or *hesychia*, they sought to live with a calm and quiet mind,

⁸⁴ Sittser, p.76.

⁸⁵ Benedicta Ward, *Theodora #3 in The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (London: Cistercian Publications, 1975), p.85.

⁸⁶ Wendy Wright, 'Desert Listening,' *Weavings*, 9.3 (1994), 10-14 (p.10).

without inner disturbance.⁸⁷ Although the desert location afforded them access to much external silence it was the inner silence of the mind and heart they sought. Through the first layer of silence the desert believer discovered the work of getting to know themselves. The silence allowed their minds to wander freely and here they confronted strong emotions, past memories and unresolved issues, facing these strong urges head on.⁸⁸ One of the key findings from the participants of our study was that silence enabled them to engage with buried, painful emotions and experiences. Abba Antony once heard a voice saying, “Antony, keep your attention on yourself.”⁸⁹ Ryrie argues that this instruction was not to become self-centered but to examine the inner self for the roots of sin.⁹⁰ We see here that one of the benefits to the practice of silence that Antony realizes is how it gives space to a deeper self-knowledge. This helps to prevent the heart being taken over by corrupting thoughts or passions and this inner attention can then lead to a greater humility.⁹¹ The benefit of self-knowledge was also identified by our participants who expressed that it was an important strategy to support integrity in their external ministries.

As the desert saints settled into the deeper layers of silence they learned to listen for the voice of the Beloved. Wright proposes that listening in the desert tradition,

“Involves listening to the delicate intersection of the human heart, with its desires and dreams, and the vast and silent mystery that is God.”⁹²

In the barren, aridness of the desert this practice of silence birthed a rich intimacy between the desert seeker and God. In the previous chapter we identified that Jesus during his times of withdrawal, listened for the voice of the Father which fed his own intimate connection. Cassian in his famous literature the *Conferences*, describes being drawn into the love that unites the Father and the Son:

⁸⁷ Alexander Ryrie, *The Desert Movement* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2011), p.139.

⁸⁸ Swan, p.27.

⁸⁹ Ward, *Antony #2 Sayings*.

⁹⁰ Ryrie, p.23.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Wright, p.24.

*“when God shall be all our love, and every desire and wish and effort, every thought of ours, and all our life and words and breath...”*⁹³

If we consider how they put silence into practice, Swan maintains that they steeped their minds in scripture and other sacred readings in order to cultivate their hearts to listen to the voice of God.⁹⁴ Foster agrees with this concluding that meditation and Scripture study were key disciplines of the desert saints.⁹⁵ Thus, the silence was infiltrated by the word of God and the presence of the Spirit encouraging and correcting those who opened themselves up. However, it was not just God’s word that infiltrated the layers of silence. Here challenges were encountered as Ward records how a brother asked a hermit:

*“My thoughts wander, and I am troubled. He answered, ‘Go on sitting in your cell, and your thoughts will come back from their wanderings’.”*⁹⁶

This challenge is a point of connection to our participants who also voiced the struggle of distractions, mind chatter and racing thoughts when they sought to still their minds in the silence. We note too that our participants recorded feeling disappointed at times on retreat and this eroded the peace that being on retreat brought them. Peace, or a contemplative presence, was a deeply held value among desert ascetics⁹⁷ and this is captured by Amma Theodora who reveals the root of this:

“If someone sets out to practice contemplative quiet, the Evil one quickly comes and weighs down that person’s soul: with discouragement, with thoughts...” Amma Theodora⁹⁸

Peace was not just a value but was also recognized as a major benefit of practicing silence.

⁹³ *Conferences of John Cassian: Chapter 7: What constitutes our end and perfect bliss*, <<https://ccel.org/ccel/cassian/conferences.ii.xi.vii.htm>> [accessed 23 May 2023].

⁹⁴ Swan, p.24.

⁹⁵ Richard Foster, *Streams of living water* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2017), p.28.

⁹⁶ Ward, *Sayings*, p.70.

⁹⁷ Swan, p.60.

⁹⁸ Ward, *Theodora #3 Sayings*.

*“If you are silent, you will have peace wherever you live.” Abba Poeman*⁹⁹

Silence then was a key practice of the desert ammas and abbas who discovered in it the benefits of uncovering true self-knowledge and deep intimacy with God. They too encountered the challenges of distracted thoughts and endured their own discouragements. Silence was often undertaken with our next practice.

Solitude

*“Just as it is impossible to be at the same moment both a plant and a seed, so it is impossible for us to be surrounded by worldly honour and at the same time bear heavenly fruit.” Amma Syncletica*¹⁰⁰

Amma Syncletica paints a picture of the desert understanding of solitude as a rejection of worldly acclamation to tend to the inner garden where spirituality grows.¹⁰¹ Syncletica teaches that there is a necessity to embrace a hiddenness from the eyes of others to achieve genuine spiritual growth. The degree of solitude implemented by the desert Christians varied considerably.¹⁰² This might typically range from hermits who lived in total solitude alone in a cave, to a monastic community that shared some of life together but sought solitude to pray in their cells. What characterized all of them was withdrawal or *anachoresis*. The desert Christians withdrew from the world and ordinary human society which involved giving up their worldly possessions.¹⁰³ This contrasts with our participants adoption of solitude which was only experienced for a short and delineated amount of time and also how we saw that Jesus used solitude for restricted periods. For the desert saints their withdrawal from society to embrace solitude, was an unspoken protest against a compromising church that had grown lukewarm in the hands of Constantine.

⁹⁹ Ward, Poeman Sayings.

¹⁰⁰ *Apophthegmata Patrum: Syncletica*, < http://ldvsinger.stjohnsem.edu/@texts/0400_apophth/greek_alph/05_rho-omegai.htm#C18_12_SYNCLETICA > [accessed 23 May 2023].

¹⁰¹ Swan, p.53.

¹⁰² Ryrie, p.121.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, p.119.

How then did the desert Christians experience solitude? Nouwen summarizes solitude in the desert as the place of great struggle and the great encounter.¹⁰⁴ The struggle that Nouwen points to is the spiritual combat that they underwent as they withdrew into the desert to pray. The life of prayer that solitude afforded the desert saints was not without challenge. Evagrius in his writings “*On Prayer*” warned of the challenges that faced those praying in solitude:

*“The demon is very malignant towards any person who prays, and it employs every means to defeat his purpose.”*¹⁰⁵

Evagrius wrote extensively on the topic of the inner demons which those praying would face. He classified eight deadly thoughts or *logismoi* and encouraged those under his supervision to develop an astute awareness of their own particular vulnerabilities.¹⁰⁶ Here we can connect with the challenges our participants faced when they wrestled with thoughts of guilt and shame as they withdrew away on retreat. We noted earlier too that Jesus battled with thoughts of anguish and sorrow in the garden of Gethsemane.

The desert saints believed solitude was necessary for spiritual growth.¹⁰⁷ In the midst of the dryness and barrenness of the desert, growth of the spirit in the desert Christians blossomed. Solitude was the means to reach the ultimate goal in prayer, what Evagrius termed ‘pure prayer’ and was expressed by him as the:

*“One who loves God always converses with him as Father...”*¹⁰⁸

Solitude facilitated the desert Christians to pray and reap the benefits of deep communion with God. It is in the desert that God promised to speak to Israel through the prophet Hosea in chapter 2:14, “I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her.” In solitude the desert Christians grew in intimacy with God and learnt to hear

¹⁰⁴ Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (United Kingdom: HarperCollins, 1991), Google ebook chapter 1.

¹⁰⁵ *On Prayer* < http://www.ldysinger.com/Evagrius/03_Prayer/00a_start.htm > [accessed 23 May 2023].

¹⁰⁶ Gerald Sittser, ‘The Battle Without and Within: The psychology of sin and salvation in the desert fathers and mothers’, *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care*, 2.1 (2009), 44-66 (p.59).

¹⁰⁷ Sittser, *Water*, p.82.

¹⁰⁸ Evagrius, *On Prayer*.

his gentle whisper. I am reminded of how our participants spoke of having a relational image of God and frequently spoke of encountering friendship with God on times of retreat. Solitude was an important practice for the desert dweller deepening their dependency on God. However, as we shall see in our next practice, they recognized their need for seeking wisdom from the wise abbas and ammas that surrounded them.

Spiritual Direction

*“A brother came to Scetis to visit Abba Moses and asked him for a word. The old man said to him, ‘Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.’”*¹⁰⁹

A key foundation of spiritual direction in the desert was the belief that the first teacher of a seeker was God and the second was their cell.¹¹⁰ What was revealed in the nature of this practice was a refusal to create a relationship of dependency upon the teacher. For the desert disciple the challenge of restraining themselves from leaning too heavily on their teacher was a challenge to this spiritual practice. Amma Theodora taught the answer to this lay in the character of the teacher who:

*“ought to be a stranger to the desire for domination, vain-glory and pride.”*¹¹¹

The teacher of the disciple was not a guru or a master but was foremost a father or mother and their aim was to disappear so that the real guide the Holy Spirit would be sought.¹¹² Spiritual direction in the desert tradition could consist of simply living near or with a solitary elder and asking him or her questions arising in one’s spiritual life or it could be part of a monastic formation program.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ *Select sayings of Desert Fathers and Mothers* < http://ldysinger.stjohnsem.edu/ThSp_599z_SpDir/07a_ascet-1/00a_start.htm > [accessed 25 May 2023].

¹¹⁰ Benedicta Ward, ‘Spiritual direction in the desert fathers,’ *The Way*, 24.1 (1984), 61-70 (p.64).

¹¹¹ Ward, *Theodora #5 Sayings*.

¹¹² *Ibid*, p.66.

¹¹³ Edward Sellner, ‘Cassian and the elders: formation and spiritual direction in the desert and today,’ *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, 36.4 (2001), 417-435 (p.424).

There was more than one approach to spiritual direction. But what was common to all was the frequent request of the disciple to the teacher 'speak a word to me' and it was not the teacher that initiated but the disciple who asked.¹¹⁴

How did the desert mothers function in their role as spiritual directors? In her work Forman refers to the ammas as midwives of wisdom, this conveys the notion that the ammas (and abbas) were *pneumatophores* or bearers of the spirit.¹¹⁵ These women listened to the hearts of those around them in such a way that the Spirit birthed Christ in the disciple's hearts to bring them into a deeper awareness of him. Sellner agrees with Forman suggesting that desert Christians believed that a friendship with these midwives of wisdom could have a major effect on the direction of one's spiritual journey.¹¹⁶ We can connect this to one of our participants who experienced undertaking confession with a spiritual director on retreat and how this was a deeply healing moment for her in her spiritual journey. In this participant's life the spiritual director was used to facilitate a space where she could release a burden and so come into a fullness of God which she perceived was missing prior to the moment.

The benefits that spiritual direction brought the desert disciples enabled them to receive guidance from the abbas and ammas. This aided them to undergo spiritual transformation, a change of heart in which one identifies with Christ and seeks to become like him.¹¹⁷ In order to undergo such transformation, the less experienced disciples needed the accompaniment of those who with age had gathered wisdom and submitted themselves to the challenges of tackling the interior life.

Summary

We have seen the desert saints sought to withdraw into silence and solitude in order to do the deep interior work of the soul and discover the Beloved who waited for

¹¹⁴ Ward, *Spiritual*, p.66.

¹¹⁵ Mary Forman, *Praying with the desert mothers* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005), p.11.

¹¹⁶ Sellner, p.419.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, p432.

them in the desert. Spiritual direction also enabled them to grow in the wisdom others had gleaned before them. We have seen that these early practices form the foundations to much of what was practiced by our participants during their twenty first century retreats. The present culture, although different from the culture the desert saints sought to withdraw from, continues to be hostile to building a vibrant spirituality. The demons of today have the same purpose to defeat the spiritual seeker. The gift the desert saints impart is the example they set by the willingness to battle for that which kept them spiritually enflamed. They sought not to fit into a lukewarm culture or be lulled into a life of ease. This speaks to pioneers in their challenging contexts who must learn to battle for respites of retreat that build resilience and spiritual intimacy today.

Conclusion

In this research I set out to explore how pioneers experienced spiritual retreats and what were the benefits and challenges they encountered. The results demonstrate that a variety of spiritual practices were used by our participants that included: silence and solitude, prayer, meditation, spiritual direction, journaling, labyrinths, engaging with nature and creative arts. From these results I was able to show the benefits participants described which in summary included: friendship with God, finding support and refreshment for themselves and the opportunity to pay attention to their interior life. The results also indicate the challenges participants met including: external pressures like time management and internal pressures such as guilt, self-criticism and busy minds. In addition to these results, I was also able to demonstrate that the roots of spiritual retreat can be supported by both scripture and tradition.

Why then is this research necessary? Firstly, I would point to the timeliness in the light of the current issues in mental wellbeing of those involved in church ministry. 42% of clergy reported that their mental wellbeing was worse¹¹⁸ in the wake of the Covid pandemic therefore my research underlines the importance of self-care and how vital it is. The results demonstrate the tangible benefits of spiritual retreat on those who invest time away to practice this. In addition, it is relevant to those currently in pioneering who want to build sustainable ministries that endure for the long-term to consider this as a regular practice. As we have seen retreats provide the all-important space to draw near to God and the opportunity to examine the interior life. Finally, it will also speak to those responsible for training pioneers who must teach what healthy practice looks like.

¹¹⁸ Clergy Wellbeing Changes during the Covid-19 pandemic <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/Living%20Ministry%20Wave%203%20-%20clergy%20wellbeing%20and%20the%20pandemic.pdf> [accessed 02 June 2023].

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