

To Be a Pilgrim

"... a presbyter or deacon in Full Connexion stationed in an appointment within the control of the Church shall (in the performance of his or her duties as a minister) at intervals undertake a sabbatical, that is a period of release from the ordinary duties of the appointment, in addition to normal holidays, for the purpose of pursuing an approved programme of study, research, work or experience."

So reads Standing Order 744 in the Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church. At one time, sabbaticals were a rare thing granted to the fortunate few by a particularly enlightened Circuit. Then they were made available to all ministers who wanted to take them. But for a good number of years now, they have been compulsory, to be taken normally in the tenth and every subsequent seventh year of ministry.

The Church has taken the view that a period away from usual duties is a good thing, both for ministers, and for the whole Church. Ideally a minister will return to their duties well rested, refreshed, and inspired with new ideas and direction to sustain them for the next 7 years of ministry.

In order for a sabbatical to produce these results, certain conditions need to be met:

- The minister has to be completely released from their normal duties. The trouble is, many of us find it difficult to switch off, and it may only take a snippet of information about what's happening in the circuit for a minister's attention to switch from what they should be focussing on back to their appointment.

To help me make the most of this time, it is my intention to stay away from any and every circuit or church activity during my sabbatical, disable my work email and not respond to any phone messages. The technology will automatically tell people who to contact with any queries or concerns.

For the first half of my sabbatical I shall still be in Warwick, which means I may well run into you in the street (or a coffee shop..... I like coffee shops). By all means, say Hello. But please try to resist the temptation to talk to me about church matters. I know that will be hard.... It is for me too!

- The minister has to do something which they find stimulating. As many of you know, I am going to walk the Camino to Santiago de Compostela in north-west Spain, starting from the little town of St Jean Pied de Port in the French Pyrenees. It's a distance of some 480 miles, give or take a bit, staying in pilgrim hostels, refilling my water bottle from wayside fountains, carrying everything I need on my back, come rain or shine.

I'll spend the first half of my sabbatical getting ready – physically, practically, and spiritually. The Pilgrimage doesn't actually begin in France, it begins with every step I'll walk around the streets, lanes and fields of Warwickshire, every book or article about pilgrimage I read or film I watch, every hour I spend gazing into the distance, mulling over why I am

doing this and what I hope to learn – apart from some rudimentary Spanish. I intend to use my free Sundays to worship in different places and ways.

In conversations in recent weeks, some people have expressed concern that I am doing most of this trip alone. The Camino is a well-trodden pilgrim route, which tens of thousands of people do every year, and serious incidents are extremely rare. There are always other pilgrims you can fall in with if you want company, but also space to be alone with your own thoughts. Isn't that actually true of life as a whole? It is good to have companionship, but there are some parts of the journey that we have to make alone.

I'm told that the weather in northern Spain in March and April can be capricious – a sudden downpour is to be expected at every moment. I will be packing my rain poncho and Tilley hat, and taking to heart the words of John Bunyan's hymn:

Who would true valour see,
Let him come hither
One here will constant be,
Come wind, come weather.
There's no discouragement
Shall make him once relent
His first avowed intent
To be a pilgrim

Please pray for me, God bless you all, I will see you in May.

Barbara