



As I write this, I've been away from parish duties for almost 4 weeks undertaking a Study Leave Project. The time has certainly flown by, and by the time you read this I will be back to my "normal" duties.

Study Leave is available to all ministers after 5 years' service, with an annual entitlement of 2 weeks, which can be accumulated up to a maximum of 14 weeks. Parish and Presbytery duties have meant that I have not taken up much of my entitlement in recent years and so I had the maximum 14 weeks stored, and felt the time had come to make use of some of it. Study leave is a time for ministerial development and reflection, and each project has to be approved by the Church of Scotland and Presbytery, and once completed, a report must be submitted.

While it is always difficult to be away from the parish for any length of time, (both pastorally and practically), I do feel my leave has been worthwhile and will be useful to me in my ministry. I would like to say that I am very grateful to all who undertook various responsibilities in my absence, which enabled me to make full use of this time of study.

So what have I been doing for the past few weeks?

Well I have been reading, writing, travelling, attending other churches and engaging with other ministers, both here in Scotland and in the U.S., trying to develop a better understanding of the changing nature of ministry in the 21st century: the joys, challenges and concerns that we encounter and their impact on ministers and indeed the wider church.

As I met with colleagues, we discussed things like our sense of call; and explored things like our role – asking the question did we still feel that we were a preacher, teacher, prophet, counsellor, or a theologian etc, or had we moved more towards being an

administrator, conflict resolution manager, project manager/fund raiser for building renovations, etc?

We spoke of how we were engaging the people in our communities with the gospel and serving 'the least of these', and if we were involved in 'fresh expressions of church' (eg Messy Church), and sometimes we pondered the question – had we moved into maintenance mode or panic mode – just trying to get through what was immediately in front of us?

We considered the question - are we losing our focus? Are we being distracted, not only by contentious issues, but sometimes even by good things because they become too many things? We reflected on the fact that there seems to be more distractions to draw people away from church involvement than ever before. And we thought about the changes in society over recent years and what that has meant for the Church and her mission.

As you might be aware, ministry is often quite isolating, and there is not a lot of opportunity for meeting up, sharing experiences or exploring with other ministers what the future might look like. So I found the opportunity to engage with my colleagues, and reflect on shared experiences helpful, challenging and inspiring. And I hope that what has been helpful to me as a minister is something that will benefit my ministry here in Pitlochry.

Until the next time, let me share with you the words I have kept before me over recent weeks:

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit”. (Rom 15:15).

Your minister ... *Mary Haddow*