

Reflections on my Sabbatical
Rev'd Patrick Close
August 4, 2002 12 PENTECOST – YEAR A

Today mark's my fifth anniversary with you at Grace Church. It coincides with the story of the feeding of the 5,000 by Jesus. It helped me to think about what to say today as I will talk about my own "feeding frenzy" during my sabbatical. I feel like a kid again, coming back from the summer and being asked by the teacher to talk about, "What did you do this summer?" Remember those days? You had to recall the highlights of that time that already seemed so distant in your mind!

The main thing I did on my sabbatical was go looking for my mission and ministry in today's world. Where do I fit? What am I to do? How does it all connect with the Church? I would like to touch briefly on what I did and some of the things I found these past three months. I attended three conferences. I did a ten-day pilgrimage to Ireland. I visited more than 15 different Episcopal Churches. I read, I thought, I wrote, I reflected, I rested and I prayed. It was an especially rich time for me.

Most of my reflection focused around certain questions. What do I want to do? What will help me do it? What am I looking for? How real is God and Jesus in my life? What do I need to do? I am one of those people who normally keeps myself pretty busy. I don't spend as much time as I would like thinking and reflecting. During this time, I got thrown a curve ball. I had some knee surgery and then complications. Just when you think you have everything together, BOOM! The experience of surgery and hospitalization changed the plans half way through the time I had set aside. I want to thank you for the cards, e-mails, visits and calls.

My sabbatical gave me time to ask, "What's next for me, Lord?" I discovered, or rediscovered some things with this reflection. God is still at the center of my life. Jesus continues to be present in my life and my guide. My family is still very important to me. The world seems more and more unsure, unsafe, unforgiving and uncertain. There is a lot of work that we, the Church, are ignoring and not doing. Most parishes are not that much different from each other.

Some of the more memorable moments for me still resonate in my mind. I reconnected with old friends after not seeing them for many years. I was touched by the care and compassion I received in the hospital. The depth of faith and spirituality in Ireland astounded me. I was deeply moved by the occasional person who greeted me and made me feel welcome in a couple of the Churches I visited. One was the Hispanic man who helped me follow the Spanish speaking service I attended. The other was an elderly woman who helped me through the service at her Church. She introduced me to every person around us at the peace! I was impressed at one parish when the clergy, the staff the Vestry members present and other parishioners ALL introduced themselves to me before and during the service!

I am an avid reader. I came in touch with a wide range of thought. Some of the books I read were: Stephen Carter's "Integrity"; George Gallup's "The New American Spirituality"; Rowan Williams's first writing on September 11th "Out of the Ashes"; Jack Spong's "A New Christianity"; and Marcus Lokus' "Pilgrimage to Glendalough." It was

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fascinating to read so about the different approaches to Christianity that exist. I also saw a few parishes deeply committed to social ministry programs. These congregations felt very much alive.

Some of the conclusions that I came to will shape my ministry for years to come. I am interested in “church growth”, but that doesn’t necessarily mean numbers. I would like to see deeply faith and spirituality take shape in our Christian communities. I continue to be deeply committed to “outreach.” Every parish needs to be more involved with reaching out to others in need. I was reminded that I love being both a student and a teacher. Education is an important part of my faith journey. I like being with children. Too many of the places that I visited were void of young adults, teens and kids. Those Churches just didn’t feel very alive. I believe that helping others to find and fulfill their ministry is a larger part of my call than I perceived beforehand.

This has left me with dreams for Grace Church. I want to be part of a community that warmly welcomes every stranger that comes through the doors. I want to be part of a parish that is a leader in the community and the Diocese. I would love to see people talking every time they gather about how they experience God. I want more younger faces around me. I would hope that we could discover how to better use our talents in the faith community. I want never to have to worry about whether we have enough money or volunteers. I would love to see each member of the parish involved in one of the many outreach and service ministries led by the laity! I want every person in the parish to understand what it means to be a Christian.

I don’t know what it will take to make these dreams a reality. It looks like a lot to bite off and chew ... but I remember the story of the feeding and remember how Jesus took what was offered and worked a miracle. I just wish we would offer more so that greater miracles might take place here. Have you thought about your faith? Do you have dreams that would take this faith community to new places? Who have you shared them with lately? Are our dreams too big, or too small? All I can say is this point is stay tuned ... there is more to come!