

Retreat Space: Sustainability for Our Well-Being and Formation

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Abstract

Purposeful retreat time away functions as a threshold space that enables the integration of body, mind, and spirit in ways that daily ministry cannot.

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A component of the theological degree pathway in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America is a yearlong internship of pastoral or deacon practice in a congregation or service organization. During this intentional learning time, students are required to attend two regional retreats. Both the student intern and their supervisor are asked to be present at the start and end of the internship for a two-night, three-day retreat that allows for reflection, connection, and rest with others who are on a similar journey. Given the complexities of our lives today, a retreat can be a disruption of the ebb and flow of what we know and do so well in our roles as leaders, but it is a necessary component of lifelong formation.

St. John's Abbey Guesthouse in Collegeville, Minnesota, is a retreat center nestled between St. John's University and St. Benedict's University. The building and the people within offer a framework of invitation to pause and pay attention. The architecture is simple; wall-to-ceiling windows provide views of the lake and surrounding forest. Numerous hiking paths have meditative spots for contemplation, drawing retreatants into a different space and time. Individual guestrooms hold a simple page of artwork from the St. John's Bible, narratively offering a piece of Scripture to accompany the person on retreat. Meals are lovingly prepared, and tables are set for both inner and outer dialogue. The resident artist has provided signature pottery, crafted with unique shades of blue and green, placed throughout the retreat center to invoke a sense of spiritual connectedness with art. The physical space shapes how the guests notice who and whose they are. From the minute they walk through the big heavy doors, retreatants notice that

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everything is intentionally placed to create space for each guest who is retreating on their pilgrim journey to catch their breath and step away from the usual.

Abbey Guesthouse Master Father Cyril, wearing a simple brown frock along with a quiet smile, greets each person as they enter. The message is clear; you belong in this place and time. You are the guest, embraced and enveloped in love. The heart and center of the Benedictines is hospitality, which is a core value of how and why they live into the daily rhythm of pilgrims coming and going on the spiritual journey, letting go and returning home. Out of deep recognition that God is present, monks and staff lean into opportunities to care for all. No matter where one is on the journey, it is hard to resist such a welcome.

Entering a time of retreat starts long before actually arriving at the guesthouse. Our unsettled mind might struggle to let go of the things that beg for our attention; people with great needs, family responsibilities, community or social events, and numerous other tasks we are called to tend to. Part of us might want to go on retreat, but the other part wants to remain right where we are (because it's easier). To go away on retreat and truly rest and connect with others on the formational journey as theological and spiritual leaders requires a departure from the daily grind and spaces we inhabit.

Remembering that if we only stay where we are and never pull back to take a bird's-eye view, we may not see the immense growth, deep insights, and milestone moments that impact and shape who we are becoming. Busyness in our ministry contexts fails to give us clear lenses for how we process and understand ourselves. Therefore, intentional time to step away on retreat provides a different opportunity to see, hear, taste, smell, and feel, if only for a short while.

We must exit one place to be present in a new one. The vehicle that takes us to the retreat center offers separation from what was, what is, and what will be. In these transitional holy moments, as we inhale and exhale, we may notice our mind shift to what is outside the window, our body may begin to relax, and our spirit may feel a bit more open. We are on the retreat already. Inner voices may also draw our attention to guilt and deeper feelings about not staying in our usual routines. A retreat is often the interruption we need, as individual leaders, for the sake of our communities. Arriving at a new door can be a bit like coming home to a place we didn't know we needed to be.

Resistance to the experience of retreat is completely normal. The first twenty-four hours can be uncomfortable, unsettling, and jarring as our parasympathetic nervous system tries to kick in and "come down" from what we are used to doing, which is going all the time. Our whole selves are not conditioned to settling into something new (unless we have to), and our senses are heightened as we seek to become comfortable. Expecting goodness is a beautiful way to lean into the possibilities of what our whole self is needing within this new context and community.

BODY SPACE

One spring afternoon at the beginning of a retreat, I sensed some anxiety in our gathering time, especially among those who had never been on a retreat. We faith leaders often operate cerebrally; sometimes there is a disconnect between our heads and the rest of ourselves. The result is that the “whole” of us doesn’t know what to do when the current and unique space we inhabit offers something different.

Therefore, I started with an invitation to create space and notice what was going on for the retreatants at that particular moment. Using the Alexander technique of constructive rest, I invited participants to reflect more deeply with their whole selves. They were asked to move to the floor, where they unrolled a towel, laid down on their backs with their knees up, and kept their eyes open. I could sense resistance from several, and a couple refused to participate. I invited these participants to find a comfortable position to sit in on their chairs. I then guided the group through a fifteen-minute exercise centered on breathing, being grounded, and being present. I asked the participants to be mindful of particular areas of their physical bodies on the floor or chair and to do nothing other than pay attention.

Using the following invitations, I encouraged the retreatants to

- allow the muscles of their neck to be free of tension,
- gently release their head away from their shoulders,
- notice their spine lengthen,
- notice their shoulders releasing out to the sides,
- feel their feet resting on the floor, and
- notice their breath flowing in and out of their body in its own easy rhythm.

Letting go was easier for some and harder for others, but it was clear that, despite resistance, the Spirit was doing Her work. After we were done, I asked for reflections on what it was like to engage in this practice, as many had never done anything like this before. Words like “funny,” “weird,” “vulnerable,” “a little scary,” “boring,” and “restful” were brought up. One supervisor said,

I noticed something that I haven’t tended to for a long time. I am a senior pastor who has so much going on between church, my family, and community, that I rarely stop for long enough to make connections to my whole being. I’ve had pain in my shoulder for months and have ignored it, but this experience required all of me and was a reminder that the pain is still there. Maybe I need to pay attention to what my body is telling me.

Others listened to this pastor’s processing with curiosity and through this experience saw what happens when we are given an intentional opportunity to slow down, pause, and connect with our bodies, minds, and spirits.

This particular reflective practice allowed the whole community to experience something as individuals and together. It set the tone for our retreat going forward and provided a new way for listening to God, others, and ourselves. It is also a practice that they could carry beyond the retreat and bring back into their everyday lives, integrating rest and renewal wherever they are, even if just for a few minutes.

MIND SPACE

Theological education and the internship experience encourage and provide us the space to use our minds as we process our learnings, discoveries, and reflections. Spending time unpacking the “ins and outs” of internal formation (e.g. self-awareness, emotional intelligence, spiritual practices) and external formation (e.g. leading worship, preaching, teaching) is essential. While on retreat, intentional small group sessions offer our brains a new place and time with people who are involved in a similar process but who are not in our ministry contexts. As we process, we are able to name our strengths and gifts while also acknowledging areas we need to work on and explore. Someone in the group might ask a question in a way that we have never been asked. Another person might provide a wondering that helps us become unstuck. Someone else might encourage us when we feel frustrated. The communal voices on retreat accompany us at pivotal points, allowing us to be where we are and recognize that we are always continuing to develop as leaders.

One student shared how challenging it was to be an intern, friend, wife, and mother in her relationships with her colleagues, friends, spouse, and three-month-old daughter. She felt these people in her life were always getting the short end of the stick because she couldn't be all things to everyone and it was hard for her to figure out how to balance them. “How do others do this?” she asked in desperation. After she said this, others in the room felt relieved as many of them were struggling with the same tension around being so many things at once. We obviously couldn't solve this complexity, but everyone was able to empathize, contribute, and affirm that this is the tension that many of us feel when we have commitments in different areas of our lives. This student left the retreat feeling heard and affirmed, which is what she needed to move forward. In the second half of her internship, she leaned into this struggle and discerned ways to hold space for those whom she cares deeply for. “It will never be perfectly figured out, but I hope I get better at it. Thank goodness God is in it all.” she said.

A supervisor during the small group session wanted to celebrate his intern's immense growth around preaching and leading worship. He had been working for months with the intern, encouraging her not to hide what she felt called to preach and to claim her voice. Through their weekly meetings and coaching, the intern embraced her role, leaned in with her whole heart, and found her voice. The supervisor, with enthusiasm for this significant learning and milestone moment, shared about the shift that happened within the student after the first three months of internship and then pointed out that the entire congregation felt it as well. Noticing the gift that had been unleashed, he has continued to lift up opportunities for her to preach and has learned from her, as she has learned from him. It was a joyful moment of recognition and affirmation of how a supervisor can accompany a student, cheer them on, and see them develop and fully live into their call.

SPIRIT SPACE

Spirit space on these retreats includes three sessions that explore ways in which we can integrate a deeper connection with God, nature, others, and ourselves. They are

- 1) an acknowledgement of being in the present moment,
- 2) practicing a pause, and
- 3) connecting to our Creator in communal worship.

Acknowledging the Present Moment

Acknowledging the present moment is something we often struggle with, so providing participants with a practice that grounds and centers them is an important piece of our time together. The practice begins by gathering together in community, listening to a short reading of Scripture and then inviting everyone to take a twenty-minute walk indoors (for those who are limited to this) or outdoors and pay attention to whatever we come upon. Participants are encouraged to stop and immerse themselves in the moment, listening to the sounds, smelling the air, touching things with different textures, and taking notice of what is in front of them. They are invited to snap a picture or two with their phone to capture what struck them during this time. After twenty minutes, we reconnect as a community and participants are asked to find a partner and share what they discovered.

One participant was inspired by the clouds as they lay on the ground like a child and noticed them passing by, seeing various shapes and images. There was no agenda for her in these moments, other than to just see what was before her. Another participant saw a family of mushrooms growing closely together in a bunch. The details of her photo showed the raindrops stuck to the sides and bottom of the mushroom cap, ready to fall off and hit the ground. She spent some time watching the rain drip, drip, drip. The smell of the damp earth and the sounds of the water were aspects of the moments she said she would not normally notice because she is always too busy. It heightened her awareness of God's creation by stopping and acknowledging these sounds and smells.

Using all of our senses allows for a deeper spiritual recognition of "being" with God. Paying attention is a practice that can be brought back into the places of our home, work, and neighborhoods if we are willing to "be" in the moment. If we do this, we may see that the world around us holds much more mystery and awe than we imagined.

Practicing a Pause

Practicing a pause is having uninterrupted time to rest in whatever way we need, and it offers an opportunity to create spiritual space and companionship with God and God's created goodness. These retreats provide an extended six hours of sabbath for

participants to decompress and settle into their be-ing. Being identified as a beloved child of God on retreat is a gift of grace that allows the retreatant to explore, wonder, hike, sip a cup of coffee or tea, nap, and simply “be” for a period of time. Initially, this time can feel overwhelming, particularly because we humans are conditioned to *do* things, so we struggle with the idea of not having to perform or produce something. Leaning into this space of unplanned grace is the hope for each person!

After one participant decided what she wanted to “do” during her time of practicing a pause, she sat down on her bed and soon fell fast asleep. Awakening a couple hours later, she realized as she shared with the group that “I didn’t realize how tired I really was. It had been a demanding week prior to coming on the retreat and my whole being was exhausted. My body, mind, and spirit didn’t have anything left.” Noting that she didn’t have to go or be anywhere, she was able to allow her whole self to let go in those moments. She woke up feeling refreshed. Had she not had this intentional time to pause, she told us, she wouldn’t have stopped and would have powered through the day. “Maybe I should practice a pause at least once a day. Maybe then I would notice the ways God is waiting for me.”

God met this person in rest. Her nap became a holy and spiritual moment. When we make time to let go of our plans and guilt, it is possible to notice the ways in which God draws us to God’s self so we may know our belovedness. As the retreat facilitator, I often stand on the periphery and notice the joy that arises as time unfolds. It is during these unplanned hours that the resistance to being on retreat usually starts to dissipate.

Connecting to Our Creator in Communal Worship

Connecting to our Creator in communal worship is part of the rhythm that fills and sustains us through God’s Word, song, communion, and prayer. Interns and their supervisors are always leading worship and preaching, so being in a worship space where they don’t have to be “on” is essential as they tend to their own spiritual lives. Starting and ending our days with worship sets the table for how we listen to and process with one another and are reminded of our identity as children of God.

One of our worship services centers us in breath prayer. Very few words are spoken, but the communal inhale and exhale allows our prayers for the church and the world to be held and released. Our congregations and communities carry so much in these challenging days, so being able to sit together in this spiritual space allows tears to flow, candles to be lit, and sighs to be felt. The intimacy of our breath connects us and reminds us that without the air that we breathe, we would not be here. We need each other—that is abundantly clear. There is an unspoken understanding among all who are in the worship space that, as leaders in the church, our hearts carry a lot, but we are not alone.

Worshipping together on retreat is a shared lived experience that connects and strengthens the relationships between God, ourselves, and each other. Tending to our

spiritual lives around the tangible gifts God provides for us through Word and Sacrament, we are anchored and reminded that we are enough, just as we are.

Throughout the retreat, as the minutes pass, I see more smiles, and relaxed, calm postures, and deep connections are made. The way each participant engages at the end is profoundly different from when they first arrived. The community as a whole feels as if it has had a unique experience that has bonded them to each other. The scales have fallen off the eyes of those who were there to check a box because the retreat was required of them. Time allowed us space, and space allowed us time.

Reflective practices in reflective spaces are crucial for paying attention to the Holy One and to each other. The final and last morning together in worship draws each of us into the reality that we are being sent from this place back home to that which is familiar, to people and communities we know well. The big doors of the retreat center that welcomed our entrance bless us as we exit. A small touch of grief washes over us as we now recognize the gift of all that has unfolded in these days, especially the moments of grace, love, and care. We intentionally paused to take notice of what God has been up to, and we identified and listened to the ways we and others are being formed as humans and leaders. Our whole selves are blessed as we return to our daily lives to love and be loved, for that is the pilgrim's journey.

“The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore (Psalm 121:8 NRSVue).