

Study Leave Report

From Stone to Silence:

*Staying in the Presence of God
and Rediscovering the Meaning of the Church.*

Rev. Dr. Sun Mi Lee

St. Austell's Uniting Congregation

Northern Presbytery

Study leave: 13 April – 28 May 2026

Location(s):

The Basilica de la Sagrada Família, Barcelona, **Spain**

Taizé Community, Burgundy, **France**

Bonnevaux Christian Meditation Centre, Poitou, **France**

Executive Summary

My Study Leave took place from 13 April to 28 May 2026 under the theme: **“From Stone to Silence: Staying in the Presence of God and Rediscovering the Meaning of the Church.”**

After fifteen years of serving in parish ministry, I felt a need to step away from the regular demands of ministry in order to be personally refreshed, spiritually renewed, and further equipped for faithful service. This Study Leave became an opportunity to revisit the foundations of my vocation and to reflect deeply on the question: *What is the church at its heart?*

The focus of my study was the relationship between the presence of God and the identity of the church. In a time when many churches are facing challenges such as declining attendance, changing communities, and practical concerns around buildings and ministry structures, I wanted to rediscover the essence of the church beyond programmes, activities, and institutional forms. My desire was to explore how the church can become a community that truly encounters God, worships Christ, and reflects the presence of the Holy Spirit.

My journey included three significant Christian contexts. The first was a visit to the Basilica de la Sagrada Família in Barcelona, Spain (1 – 2 May). Through Antoni Gaudí’s vision of the church as a “Bible in stone,” I reflected on the theological meaning of sacred space. The building demonstrated how beauty, light, nature, and architecture can point people toward God’s glory. This experience reminded me that church buildings are not merely functional spaces but visible witnesses of faith and invitations to encounter God.

The second part of my Study Leave was participation in the Taizé Community in France (3–9 May). Through daily worship, scripture, silence, music, shared meals, and communal life, I experienced the church as a worshipping community. Taizé showed me the power of simplicity and the importance of creating spaces where people can come before God without distraction. The experience renewed my understanding that the church is formed not primarily by programmes or activities but by people gathered in prayer and worship.

The final part of my journey was at Bonnevaux, a Christian meditation retreat centre in France (10–17 May), where I participated in the “Deepen Meditation” programme. Through three daily periods of silent meditation, teaching sessions, and communal reflection, I explored the contemplative dimension of Christian faith. Influenced by the writings of A. W. Tozer, particularly the importance of seeking and experiencing God’s presence, I was reminded that spiritual renewal begins with a deeper awareness of God’s nearness. In silence,

I rediscovered that the foundation of Christian life and ministry is not activity but relationship with God.

The main learning from this Study Leave can be summarised as a movement **from stone, to people, to God in silence**. Sagrada Família taught me that the church is called to visibly proclaim God's glory. Taizé revealed the church as a community gathered in worship. Bonnevaux reminded me that the deepest reality of the church is a people who live in the presence of God.

This experience will have a significant impact on my ministry. It has encouraged me to reflect on worship not only as a place of teaching and proclamation but also as a space of encounter with God through silence, prayer, music, and beauty. I hope to introduce appropriate contemplative elements into worship while remaining firmly grounded in Scripture and centred on Christ. I also hope to develop sermon series, small group discussions, and spiritual practices that help people deepen their relationship with God.

Personally, this Study Leave renewed my own spiritual life and strengthened my sense of calling. I return to ministry with a deeper conviction that sustainable ministry flows from communion with God. The church is not simply an organisation to be maintained but a community called to live in God's presence and reflect Christ's love to the world.

Ultimately, this Study Leave helped me rediscover the meaning of the church: a people gathered by God, transformed by His presence, and sent into the world as witnesses of His grace.

From Stone to Silence: Staying in the Presence of God and Rediscovering the Meaning of the Church

1. Introduction and Purpose

Having served in parish ministry for the past fifteen years, I felt a growing need to step away from the regular demands of ministry in order to be spiritually refreshed, personally renewed, and further equipped for faithful service. Ministry is a privilege, yet the ongoing responsibilities of preaching, pastoral care, administration, and leadership can sometimes leave little space for deeper reflection on one's own spiritual life and vocation.

The theme of my Study Leave was "**From Stone to Silence: *Staying in the Presence of God and Rediscovering the Meaning of the Church.***" Throughout my years of ministry, I have often reflected on a simple yet profound question: *What is the church at its heart?* In a rapidly changing society, churches are often evaluated by attendance, programmes, finances, or buildings. Yet Scripture reminds us that the church is fundamentally a community gathered by God, centred on Christ, and sustained by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

My purpose was therefore twofold. First, I sought personal spiritual renewal through worship, contemplation, and prayer. Second, I wanted to rediscover the meaning of the church by experiencing different expressions of Christian faith and community. Through visits to Sagrada Família in Spain, the Taizé Community in France, and the Bonnevaux Meditation Centre in France, I explored three dimensions of the church: the church as sacred witness, the church as worshipping community, and the church as a people living in God's presence.

2. Overview of Study Activities

Sagrada Família, Barcelona, Spain (1 – 2 May)

My journey began at the Basilica de la Sagrada Família in Barcelona. Designed by Antoni Gaudí, this extraordinary building was far more than an architectural project. Gaudí described it as a "**Bible in stone,**" intending every aspect of the building to communicate the Christian story and draw people toward God. During my visit, I observed the building's theological symbolism, participated in worship, and reflected on how sacred space shapes faith and witness.

Taizé Community, France (3 – 9 May)

The second stage of my study leave took place at the Taizé Community in France. I participated in the daily rhythm of prayer, worship, Bible study, communal work, and shared meals. Three worship services were held each day, centred on scripture, song, silence, and prayer. This experience exposed me to a different model of Christian community and worship from the one I have typically experienced and led in New Zealand.

Bonnevaux Meditation Centre, France (10 – 17 May)

The final and most intensive part of the study leave was participation in the "Deepen Meditation" programme at Bonnevaux, the international retreat centre of the World Community for Christian Meditation. The programme included teaching sessions, small-group reflection, three daily periods of silent meditation, and two full "Desert Days" spent entirely in silence. Through this experience, I sought to deepen my awareness of God's presence and explore the relationship between contemplation, discipleship, and Christian community.

3. Key Learnings and Reflections

Sagrada Família: The Church as Sacred Witness

My first learning came through Sagrada Família. Gaudí understood architecture not merely as construction but as theology expressed in stone. Every detail of the basilica points beyond itself to God. Light symbolises God's presence, height reflects God's greatness, nature reveals God's creation, and beauty proclaims God's glory.

As I walked through the cathedral, I was surrounded by visitors from all over the world. Many admired the architecture, engineering, and artistic achievement. They took photographs and marvelled at the building's beauty. Yet amidst the crowds, I noticed others quietly praying. Some entered as tourists; others entered as worshippers.

This distinction challenged me deeply. What is the purpose of a church building? Certainly, church buildings serve a missionary purpose by welcoming believers and non-believers alike. Yet their deeper purpose is to bear witness to God's presence and glory. A church building should not simply impress people; it should invite them into worship.

This reflection led me to consider our own churches in New Zealand. Many congregations, particularly smaller churches, struggle with maintaining buildings due to financial pressures. As a result, conversations often focus on practical concerns. However, Sagrada Família reminded me that church buildings communicate theology. Even simple buildings can express beauty, hospitality, reverence, and hope.

Through this experience I learned that the church is called to be a visible witness to God's glory. Buildings matter not because they are sacred in themselves but because they can point people toward the living God.

Taizé: The Church as a Worshipping Community

At Taizé, I encountered a very different expression of church. If Sagrada Família highlighted the visible structure of the church, Taizé revealed the church as a gathered community of prayer.

The rhythm of life was remarkably simple. Three times each day people gathered for worship consisting of scripture, repetitive chants, silence, and prayer. There were no elaborate programmes, no dominant personalities, and no performance. Everyone stood equally before God.

What impressed me most was the level of engagement. People from different countries, cultures, generations, and denominations participated wholeheartedly. The simplicity of worship created space for deep attentiveness. Shared meals, Bible study groups, and communal responsibilities reinforced the sense that everyone belonged and everyone contributed.

Through this experience I rediscovered the power of communal worship. The church is not primarily defined by activities or programmes but by people gathering before God in prayer. Christian unity is found not in uniformity but in a shared orientation toward Christ.

At the same time, Taizé also prompted important questions. Although the community is known for peace and reconciliation, I found myself reflecting on issues of inclusion. The large group of brothers wearing white clergy robes occupied a visibly distinctive place in worship, and I saw few women in visible leadership roles despite the significant presence of

women in the community. As a woman minister, I found myself asking whether the community fully embodied the inclusiveness it proclaimed.

I also reflected on the importance of Christ-centred worship. The beauty of the music, silence, and visual symbols created a profound spiritual atmosphere. Yet I was challenged to consider how worship remains explicitly centred on the person and work of Jesus Christ. If elements of Taizé worship are adapted in my own context, they must remain firmly grounded in Scripture and centred on Christ rather than spiritual experience itself.

Taizé taught me that the church is first and foremost a worshipping community—a people gathered around prayer, scripture, and God's presence.

Bonnevaux: The Church as the Dwelling Place of God's Presence

The deepest learning emerged during my time at Bonnevaux. Influenced by A. W. Tozer's writings, particularly *The Pursuit of God* and *God's Pursuit of Man*, I arrived with a desire to cultivate a deeper awareness of God's presence.

Tozer argues that many Christians know about God without truly experiencing His presence. He reminds believers that spiritual renewal begins not with better programmes but with a renewed awareness of God's nearness. This became a guiding theme throughout my retreat.

The practice of thirty minutes of silent meditation three times each day was initially difficult. My mind wandered, and silence felt uncomfortable. However, as the days progressed, I noticed a gradual change. My heart became quieter. I experienced a growing sense of peace and attentiveness. Rather than trying to think about God, I simply rested in God's presence.

This experience reminded me that Christianity is fundamentally about relationship rather than ritual. Before the church is an institution, organisation, or programme, it is a people living in communion with God.

One of the most surprising aspects of the retreat was the deep bond that developed within our small meditation group. We knew very little about one another personally and spent relatively little time socialising. Yet through gathering in silence before God, a profound sense of connection and love emerged among us.

This experience reinforced my conviction that genuine Christian community is ultimately a gift of the Holy Spirit. Deep fellowship is not created merely through programmes or activities. It emerges when people encounter God together.

Bonnevaux taught me that the church's deepest identity is found in God's presence. Worship, mission, discipleship, and fellowship all flow from this reality.

4. Future Actions and Ongoing Integration

Although my ministry at this congregation will conclude in six months, I believe the fruits of this Study Leave will continue beyond this ministry context. During my remaining time, I hope to share some of these insights through preaching, worship, pastoral care, and spiritual encouragement. As I move into a new ministry, I will carry these learnings with me and allow them to continue shaping my ministry.

Deepening Worship as an Encounter with God

One of the most significant insights from this Study Leave is the importance of worship as a place of encountering God. In future ministry, I hope to enrich worship by incorporating appropriate moments of silence, contemplative prayer, reflective music, and opportunities for personal response. These practices will remain grounded in Scripture and centred on Christ, helping worshippers grow in their relationship with God.

Nurturing Spiritual Formation

The experience at Bonnevaux reminded me that spiritual renewal begins with an awareness of God's presence. I hope to encourage individuals and congregations to rediscover Christian spiritual disciplines such as silent prayer, meditation on Scripture, and reflective prayer through small groups, prayer gatherings, and other opportunities for spiritual growth. My goal is not simply to introduce new programmes but to cultivate a culture of attentiveness to God.

Personal Spiritual Practice

The most important ongoing action is my own spiritual discipline. This Study Leave reminded me that ministry must flow from communion with God. I intend to continue regular practices of prayer, silence, and meditation, not as additional tasks but as the foundation of my relationship with God and my calling as a minister.

5. Conclusion

As I reflect on this Study Leave, I see a progression from stone to people to silence.

Sagrada Família reminded me that the church bears visible witness to God's glory. Taizé revealed the church as a worshipping community gathered in prayer. Bonnevaux taught me that the church's deepest reality is life in the presence of God.

Together, these experiences renewed my conviction that the true church is not defined primarily by buildings, programmes, or activities. At its heart, the church is a community of people who encounter God, worship Christ, and are transformed by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

This Study Leave provided personal refreshment and spiritual renewal, but more importantly, it helped me rediscover the essence of the church I am called to serve. I return to ministry with renewed gratitude for God's gracious presence and a deeper desire to help others encounter the living God.

My prayer is that both my personal ministry and the congregation I serve will increasingly become a community that lives in God's presence, reflects Christ's love, and bears witness to God's glory in the world.

Appendix A: Study Leave Travel Itinerary

Study Leave Theme: *From Stone to Silence: Staying in the Presence of God and*

Rediscovering the Meaning of the Church

Date	Location	Activity
13–28 April 2026	New Zealand	Personal preparation for Study Leave: reading, prayer, reflection, and preparing the study focus and goals
29–30 April	To Europe	International travel to Europe
1–2 May 2026	Sagrada Família, Barcelona, Spain	Observation and theological reflection on sacred architecture, worship space, and the church as visible witness to God's glory
3–9 May 2026	Taizé Community, Taizé, Burgundy, France	Participation in daily worship, Bible study, communal life, prayer, and reflection on the church as a worshipping community
10–17 May 2026	Bonnevaux Meditation Centre, Marçay, France	Participation in the "Deepen Meditation" programme, silent meditation, Desert Days, lectures, and small-group reflection
18–20 May 2026	To New Zealand	Return flight from France to New Zealand
21–28 May 2026	New Zealand	Personal reflection, journaling, reading, consolidation of learning, and preparation for return to ministry

Appendix B: Photographs



Sagrada Família: 'Passion' Facade



Sagrada Família: Interior ceiling



Taizé Community: Interior Worship Space



Bonnevaux Meditation Centre: Main Building Exterior

Appendix C: Reading List

Tozer, A. W. (1948). *The Pursuit of God: The Human Thirst for the Divine*.

Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications.

This book invited reflection on the deep longing of the human heart for God and the importance of cultivating a life of prayer, surrender, and intimacy with God. It connected with the experience of visiting Taizé, where simplicity, silence, and prayer create space for encountering God.

Tozer, A. W. (1961). *The Pursuit of Man: The Divine Conquest of the Human Heart*.

Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications.

This book emphasised that spiritual life is not only about humanity seeking God but also about God's active pursuit of humanity. It encouraged reflection on vocation and ministry as participation in God's mission rather than merely human effort.

Freeman, Laurence. (2016). *Christian Meditation: Your Daily Practice*.

London: Continuum / Bloomsbury.

This resource deepened understanding of contemplative prayer and the role of silence in Christian spirituality. It connected strongly with the rhythm of prayer experienced in the Taizé community and the Bonnevaux retreat environment.

Reynolds, Stefan. (2021). *Living with the Mind of Christ: Mindfulness and the Way of Jesus*.

London: Darton, Longman & Todd.

This book explored the transformation of the mind through Christ-centred awareness and discipleship. It encouraged reflection on how ministers cultivate inner attentiveness to God in the midst of pastoral responsibilities.

Meyer, Joyce. (2003). *The Power of Simple Prayer: How to Talk to God About Everything*.

New York: FaithWords.

This book highlighted the importance of approaching God through honest, simple, and everyday prayer. It reinforced the understanding that prayer is not a religious duty but a relationship of trust and dependence on God.