

RECHARGING YOUR BATTERIES

Jackie Macadam explores the spiritual benefits of an alternative summer break.

THE world is becoming an ever more pressurised place.

Deadlines draw closer; everything is expected instantly, from food, to drink, to service in the supermarket or restaurant to the latest email needed by return.

Small wonder then, that more and more Christians are Feeling that Jesus is being left somewhere in the wake; that there are just not enough hours in the day to do everything you would want to do-including leave time For God.

That probably explains why retreats are becoming more popular – not just for people in the ministry, but increasingly, For those who just Feel that they need to recharge their batteries for a Few days, or longer.

"As we walked out into the orchard where the labyrinth is laid out, it began to rain. After walking for five minutes, it was absolutely torrential. Then the sky darkened, thunder began to boom around us and

lightning split the sky. I have seldom felt more excited in all my life.

"This was God in all His glory; untamed, the raw power unleashed all around. It was truly inspiring."

Robin Anker-Petersen is talking about a recent experience he had while leading a labyrinth walk at 'The Bield at Blackruthven', a Christian retreat centre in Perthshire that he runs with his wife, Marianne and a staff team.

"Retreats are very much deeply embedded in scripture," he says. "Jesus recognised the need to retreat-to take himself away from the crowds; to give himself space to reconnect with God and refocus, re-energise, and regenerate his spirit.

"Jesus would go up the mountain – but retreats in the countryside and even in cities where you can just get away from the hectic daily life around you work just as well!"

Robin and Marianne

believe in the power of retreat. When they taught at a theological college in Southern Sudan in the early 1980s, they watched how people would arrive, washed out, exhausted, mentally and physically. They were allowed space to simply be alone if they wanted; to be undisturbed; to have no responsibilities; just to relax.

"We knew that 'guided or led retreats' where a leader will take a person or a group through a retreat experience, worked, but we were fascinated to see how these solitary escapes worked as well.

"At the end of their retreat, people who had taken the chance to simply find their own space again were rejuvenated and renewed as well.

"The tradition of retreat has survived through centuries." Robin says.

"St Columba Fled to Iona to escape From his previously sinful life - he set up an Abbey on the island to take time to listen to God

– and that was the beginning of his redemption.

"Monasteries provided opportunities For early retreats. Egyptian monks Felt the need to retreat from the affluent society around them and took to the desert. Sometimes however, the people would follow them, so loose communities were created.

"Retreats became places of refuge. People who felt overwhelmed by life could escape for a while by leaving it behind and finding relief in a simpler, quieter life where they could get back in touch with God in the 'small, quiet spaces'."

The Family moved to Alloa when Robin became chaplain at Stirling University, worked at a local church, and trained in the Ignatian approach, where listening to God and making room in your life is a crucial element.

"A colleague worked in a spiritual centre, which was fine, but the grounds were very run down at the time. I just had the Feeling that as a place of retreat it could have offered more tranquility if it had been better attended to.

"I guess God was planting a seed in me. I knew that my contract with my church ended at Christmas 1996 and I began to look to see what else I could do – and equally I knew that the

world of parish ministry was not for me.

"Round about then, a friend began sending me estate agent brochures for houses that I could turn into a centre to run retreats from. Marianne and I would visit some of them, more out of a sense of fun. Our understanding of the need for a retreat had begun to grow inside us, but after looking in vain for the right place for several months, we shelved our plans thinking God had other plans for us. He did!

"In November 1996, I was invited to Blackruthven House to lead some workshops on healing ministries. While I was there, the hosts said that they were going to sell up and did I want it to set up a healing or retreat centre...

"I said no of course and went home. But I couldn't sleep. I tossed and turned all night. I asked God to help – to tell me what I was missing. I called the next morning and asked if I could come and have another look.

"I realised that I hadn't actually seen round the grounds while I'd been there. This time I was given the full tour and frankly, every time I turned a corner my jaw just dropped further.

"I had been brought to the centre I had always wanted.

"We worked at building up the Steading as a guest

area instead of converting the main house. It was easier to build from the basics and install the safety requirements at the outset than try to change the original features of the older building.

"One of the first things we did was to convert the carpenter's workshop into the chapel. We wanted to make the chapel the engine room of the whole place. We wanted worship and prayer to be at the centre of the retreat.

"We have places here to eat, meet, sleep, swim, walk, an arts base, a gallery and all can be used for praying. We even have swings for adults to allow them to experience the freedom they had as a child. Art is used as an aid to people finding expression for their creative as well as connecting to their spiritual sides, without necessarily using words.

"We pray communally twice a day, at 9am and 5pm. We often go on a walk round the labyrinth in the evening – sometimes on bare feet.

"One of the First things we often ask people to do when they arrive is to go out into the grounds and just sit under a tree for an hour or so. When they do so, they can listen to the birds, the wind in the leaves; they can smell the flowers, the grass; they feel the grass under them and the warmth of the

wood behind them. They reconnect in a unique and deep way with the natural world that God created. They begin to feel Him and experience Him with all their senses - and that's when they begin to relax.

"Some people come in groups; some in pairs and some just as individuals. They have all kinds of reasons for feeling that they need to take a retreat. Usually they simply need to find some space again; to get away from the speed and intensity of modern life.

"Nowadays all the technology that drives us on means that we very much seem to live in our heads – we have forgotten to live in the world that God gave us with ALL our senses - and that's what a place like this can help us regain."

The centre offers a variety of types of retreat, with short stays and much longer visits available – with some people choosing to stay for several weeks in the self-contained Gate Lodge. Retreats can be led or silent, where a person will only talk to their accompanier for perhaps half an hour a day, choosing instead to listen for the deeper call in life or for the life notes they are missing.

"We ask people to switch off their mobile – or leave it behind before they come; to put away the laptop, and put away the

books they have brought to read," says Robin.

"You can see them begin to relax once they have been 'given permission' to let go of the trappings of modern life. Isolating yourself from distractions is really the point, so that you can hear the voice of God.

"We like to think of the Bield as a place that offers hospitality; where there's a physical environment to connect again spiritually and where you have space to find yourself again.

"A God who became incarnate is at the heart of our faith. Naturally we therefore have a concern for our environment and a commitment to good stewardship of the land and to reaching out to wider sections of the community. We run our cattle farm and all vegetable production organically. Southton Smallholding seeks, through therapeutic employment, to create a more inclusive community with members, volunteers, and carers who look after pet animals and produce vegetables for the centre and for sale through a box scheme. The Scheme aims to build up the self confidence of people who normally endure long term unemployment and who may feel undervalued.

"The Bield is not a sacred place – but the people who use it tell us

that it becomes sacred to them."

"It's related to Life"

The Rev Iain Goring, interim minister in Stirling presbytery, has recently completed his second retreat.

"I went on retreat for the first time during study leave in 2001. I chose to do a mid week retreat (Monday evening to Friday lunchtime) at Loyola Hall, a Jesuit centre outside Liverpool.

"It was a silent retreat - and that took a bit of getting used to. I was unsure what to expect beforehand and not sure if I could 'do it', but after a very short time, I found myself enjoying it enormously.

"It was such a relief to relax and not worry; not have to plan anything. It allowed space to think and just reflect. The accommodation was comfortable - it's not as if we were living in monastic cells! There was a lounge available for us to use, tea and coffee available all the time and the meals were very good.

"We were well looked after. At first, a silent retreat seems strange.

"We are so used to the daily 'pleasantries' that the first time you pass someone and simply nod instead of saying 'hello' seems almost rude. But it very quickly becomes something to be treasured. It gives you a bit

of discipline; allows you to be aware of the silence around you - though it's nice, when you meet again on the Friday, to be able to say hello and share some words. It's a true shared experience, and that helps you appreciate the others around you too.

"A retreat gives you a chance for deep reflection – and though my retreat was a 'silent' one, I did have a daily meeting of around 40 minutes with a spiritual director. I kept a spiritual journal where I recorded my thoughts and feelings and any insights I felt I'd had, and though it was private, I was able to discuss any points I wanted to raise with the spiritual director, and we could talk them through, referring to passages in the Bible that could be relevant or cast some light into my thoughts.

"I decided to go for another retreat just a month or so ago. I've been an interim minister for the past eight years, and I was feeling tired. I wanted to find that space again, to refresh my mind and my spirit and give me a spiritual reserve for the next few years.

"I elected to go to the same place again, and do the same retreat, a guided silent retreat.

"This time I knew what to expect and I feel I managed better. I was able to embrace the silence more quickly and I wasn't nervous

or anxious at all. I decided I was just going to enjoy the whole time for the peace, the prayer, the meditation and the reflection it offered.

"It wasn't expensive - under £200 for the whole break.

"It's only when you really look at what's deep inside, talk it through with someone who is spiritually very experienced, that you can 'unpack' it and deal with it, and allow yourself to move on in your life.

"It's too easy nowadays to become overwhelmed with the chaos of everyday life.

"There were around nine people on the retreat we were on, all denominations and from very different environments.

"Retreats really do have so much to offer – even if not everything feels totally comfortable you can always benefit enormously from the experience. I believe everyone can.

"It's a very moving experience – I wasn't prepared for how moving it would be the first time. It's fundamentally related to life and asks you to explore your thoughts and feelings.

"It gives you a rare chance nowadays to really explore your relationship with God, and gives you space to hear His voice in your life."