

Rev. Peter Taylor (Borders Mission Circuit) SABBATICAL 2019.
'Sabbatical Doors & Windows'

In August, within part of my sabbatical and that of my wife Sam's (a Deacon in the same circuit as me) we made a return visit to Bulgaria, where we served as Methodist Mission Partners between 2003-2007. I planned in time on my Sabbatical to focus on ICONS and Bulgaria has many of these within its Orthodox cathedrals and monasteries. So, coupled with an opportunity to reconnect with the Methodist Church there, it seemed a good chance to make the most of my sabbatical interests.

I visited a number of monasteries and museums which have some incredible collections of icons and frescoes. Looking back to when we lived in Bulgaria, I think I regarded Icons as a 'tourist attraction' and didn't fully understand their meaning. I hope to be able to benefit from this experience and I believe it will help me in my devotional time and in leading worship, Retreats and Quiet days. For us as a family, it was wonderful to re-connect with Bulgaria, through the Methodist churches we visited and the communities we lived in, and when visiting new places.

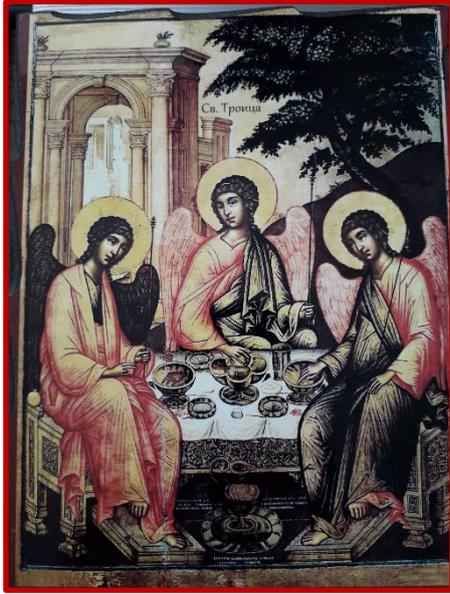
'WINDOWS into heaven' is a well-known phrase when talking about icons. I find myself thinking about some more '*spiritual furniture*', DOORS.



It fascinated me that *The Annunciation* Icon (pictured here) is always on the front 'doors' of the iconostasis in an Orthodox church. Jim Forrest in his book *Praying with Icons* explores the significance of this: "*The sanctuary representing, in church architecture, the kingdom of God. Before the royal doors, each Baptized person receives, in Holy Communion, the body and blood of Christ. With the Annunciation, Mary received God, body and soul.*"

Seeing this again, gave me a powerful reminder of the heavenly (Gabriel) and earthly (Mary) DOORS meeting and opening to a new phase; for Mary (and for all followers of Christ) The doors (womb) protect and open to reveal The Christ child. A sabbatical is a time when, in a sense, the doors of ministry close partially shut. During sabbatical there is space to open doors, to look through windows.

ICONS: What is an *Icon*, what does the word mean? '*Icon*' comes from the Greek *eikon* and means 'image'. The word *icon* is also closely connected to a Russian word for window "окно". Icons are seen as *windows into God*. As St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13, '*They perhaps help us to see though a mirror dimly what one day we will see face to face.*' Windows/mirrors perhaps can help us appreciate icons and their use. Maybe Icons can help us look through a window at our lives as Disciples, Church members, ministers?

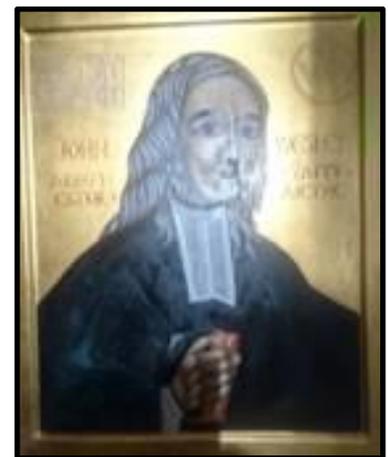


Whilst in Veliko Tarnovo (centre of the country) I purchased a small copy of a Byzantine Icon based on Andrei Rublev's icon of *'The Holy Trinity'*. (See Genesis 18:1-16 & Hebrews 13:2 *"Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to **angels** without knowing it."*) This icon has more colour and more definition than perhaps the usual one we see in Western Christianity. I have learnt that in the original icon, Abraham and Sarah were present, but Rublev 'removed' them. There is much to ponder in this Icon, the colours of the 3 persons of The Trinity for example, and what about all the implements under the table? Radical Methodist hospitality?! Look at the space at the front, an invitation for you and me to share in holy Communion and in the work of the Trinity. What does this Icon say

or suggest to you? This is one of the icons that I shall reflect on further in my future ministry, e.g. for Quiet Day, Worship.

And, Hey hang on you Methodists who get a bit twitchy with Icons! There is an icon of John Wesley at Wesley's Chapel, London. The icon was created by Dr Thomas McCloughlin. Rev Jennifer Potter informed me they wanted the commissioned icon to relate to Wesley's Chapel, so the icon has a drawing of the Chapel in the left hand top corner and the dove and serpent motif from the Chapel balcony and stonework in the top right hand corner. Under the Chapel building is the Greek for builder and under the symbol the Greek for *Evangelist*.

Some people still ask us what is happening in Bulgaria and in the Methodist Church. For the Church, I sense that its life and witness can sometimes still be hard going. The Methodist Church and others can still be regarded as a sect or treated with disdain. Bulgaria hit the news in 2018 when there was a religious law that was an attempt to introduce heavy restrictions not only for Protestants but also for all religious communities other than the Orthodox Church and the Muslim community. In the end it was dropped, but highlights the issues still faced by the small, yet faithful, Methodist communities. It is encouraging to know that The World Methodist Council and the European Methodist Council voted resolutions in this situation, which were sent to the Bulgarian Parliament, President and Prime Minister.



Rev. Margarita Todorova was very instrumental in the process of discussing and voting. The Methodist Church in Bulgaria itself was very active, also through the Bulgarian Evangelical Alliance. Rev. Daniel Topalski (Superintendent in Bulgaria) presented the Bulgarian case during a seminar at the European Parliament and meetings with some MP advisors. This work was done with very close cooperation with the Conference of European Churches and the European Evangelical Alliance.

On our visit to Shumen we saw the social centre (where we lived) We met Pastor Jessica Morris-Ivanova, 'recognised & regarded' as a Methodist minister in Bulgaria. Jessica is from the USA and, prior to coming into The Methodist Church, she served in Bulgaria and other countries with the Church of The Nazarene. Jessica's husband, Ivo, is training to be a minister via the European Methodist e-academy. Bulgarian Methodist ministers and preachers do some of their training at the Orthodox Theological Faculties at Sofia and Veliko Tarnovo universities.

She explained what is happening for the Church in Shumen. *"The two floors of the social centre are now rented out to a group who are the Bulgarian affiliate of a Lutheran social program that sends German teens to Bulgaria instead of sending them to jail. The rent they pay allows us to fund our social projects, such as the summer children's centre and soup kitchen that will start in the winter and feed people at weekends. The children's centre provides summer day care for children whose parents are at work during the day. This is a need because most day care centres are full by the time the summer comes because they service all year long. In the centre there are two daily academic hours: one of mathematics, Bulgarian or English and one of reading. This enables the children to catch up if they're behind in something or retain the knowledge that they attained in the school year. There is also football, aerobics and excursions."*

The Bulgarian Church relies on assistance from the Switzerland office of The United Methodist Church in Central & Southern Europe. The Church also has assistance from the USA for projects and pastors' salaries. I am grateful to The Superintendent, Rev. Daniel Topalski for the following information:

"There are 8 active elders (Presbyters), 2 probationers, 1 elder on family leave, and 9 local pastors. In terms of numbers of Methodists in Bulgaria, there are 1141 members (plus 45 baptized members-children & adults) according to the 2018 Church Statistics. There are 30 Churches in the country which also includes congregations for various language groups, as follows: 2 Armenian-speaking; 3 Turkish-speaking; 4 predominantly Roma; one newly established congregation in Dalgopol, Varna District."

During the time of the previous Superintendent, a great emphasis was placed on the renovation and recovery of buildings stolen during the time of communism. Many groups were brought into the Methodist family who were far from Methodism in their theology and practice. In the last 10 years, since Daniel Topalski became superintendent, the focus has become much more on Methodist identity and theology. He has organized a 3-year theological program to train preachers and holds regular pastoral meetings.



(Ruse Methodist Church, Pastor Evgeney)

From conversations we had during our visit, I sense the following strengths and concerns facing the Methodist Church in Bulgaria:

Strengths: Great building resources, return to theological roots, emphasis on the sacraments, committed ministers who are Wesleyan

Concerns: Dwindling and aging congregations, very dependant financially on Switzerland and the USA for projects and pastors' salaries (many churches are far from being self-sufficient)



In many places in the country we were left to think: What has changed? EU flags are still prominently displayed, there is evidence of new building development such as 'Grand Malls' in Varna and in the capital Sofia. The construction of offices and housing in parts seem to be going on at a fast rate. However, most places - urban and rural - still look and feel the same. There are some new motorways, although they do run out at points, and then you find yourself back on the bends and uneven surfaces.

People still complain of corruption, mainly they aim this lament and frustration at the politicians, local and national.

The orphanage (in Ruse) we used to go to is closed and derelict, this seemed sad initially to us, but surely it is a good thing! The 'half way home, 'Friendly support foundation', is still there for those young adults to help them with life skills. We wondered where the orphans are now. Some orphans may be with families, either their original families or with new families. Due to abuses and expose films done on orphanages, there are officially no longer any orphanages in the country. Instead they have created group homes, which are still orphanage-type homes but they try to create a more family atmosphere. To do this transition the European Union (EU) gave a lot of money. However, there is no money for the upkeep of the homes and the ongoing needs. So, now the hardship is beginning with the group homes.

Please pray for Bulgaria (Day 27 in the Prayer Handbook)



I return to *'windows and door'*: Will Church doors and windows be open fully and clear, or will some be stuck or cluttered so that one cannot see through? This allegory speaks to us both as individuals and as a Church. Sometimes in churches, congregations cannot seem to look OUT of windows preferring to be INSIDE and to look INSIDE. Whilst this may feel comfortable, it sadly can mean we do not look out to see the person who is struggling, the person who is not like us? I trust that God will help me and Sam to keep our hearts centred on all people (especially from Eastern Europe) and I hope there will be opportunities in this current circuit and District that connect with this.

During my sabbatical, I also had the opportunity to explore other themes.

Preaching related: I attended 'The Festival of Preaching' event in Oxford, which was very worthwhile. There were some very interesting lectures & seminars such as: 'Preaching the Parables, 'A Preachers Alphabet' and 'Sermons seldom heard.'

Football: I met with club chaplains as well as other Christians who explore ways of mission and outreach with people through football.

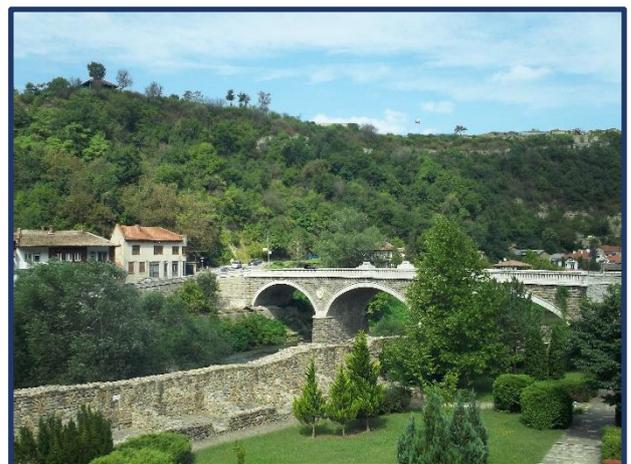
Local Ecumenical Partnerships/LEP: I was able to have some conversations with colleagues across the Midlands about Ecumenical churches, which is important as one of my Churches, New Cross, has to review its own LEP.

I attended two retreats in the UK and on some of the Sundays I was able to simply go to different churches and worship in varied styles and contexts.

Above all of this, I give all the Thanks to God (and The Methodist Church) for this sabbatical experience.

Rev. Peter Taylor November, 2019

(If you want to see the fuller version of my Sabbatical written item, please contact me)





Some pictures from my time on Sabbathal. Pictures include: Veliko Turnovo & Rila Monastery in Bulgaria; Team Taylor with Methodist friends in Ruse, Bulgaria; Pete & Sam admiring the incredible frescoes at Rila; Ffald y Brenin retreat centre in West Wales; Christ Church Cathedral & University, Oxford.