

# sacred pause

by Ben Smith, Australia Mission President

Spending months in a kind of pause, albeit a forced one, was beneficial for me as it helped clear up some elements of my life which had become a little out of balance. My clarity of purpose had faded a little, and this time has been powerful in recalibrating my purpose and where my time was best spent. Three or four months of intentional self-work had garnered the clarity I needed to move forward with determination, ready to hit the ground running when isolation concluded. And yet, now, another pause. Winter.

Where I live on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria, tourism is a large part of our community, and over summertime and school holidays our population swells dramatically. This means we don't usually enjoy much of our lifestyle until that quiets down a little, and autumn is the best time for that. Walks on the beach, dinners out at restaurants not filled to capacity, long shadows cast across endless green fields, all things I cherish and anticipate post summer. This year though, exiting isolation at the start of winter was a dramatic change for our bodies and minds, not able to enjoy the splendour of our environment as much as usual. Consequently, I'm finding myself entering a second pause, the one I'd usually have in winter, yet I've already had that one this year! Perhaps, though, this second pause could be just as sacred and go deeper than the first. It's the second, 'how are you?' you ask a friend when they answer, 'I'm ok', when clearly they're not. The second question may indeed result in a deeper answer filled with truth and honesty.

Without our buildings, as a church it has been challenging to understand how we relate to the world, and as a movement which has for decades relied on our bricks and mortar sacred places as a place of gathering, in some ways we've struggled for connection. We've had worships online, prayer groups online, and our phones have enabled us to connect one on one. Yet our love towards each other means we yearn for physical closeness.

Our congregations have taken this time to pause and reflect on how we gather, how to have meaningful community, and how to grow as a community of faith in a time where we're already paddling upstream. It also seems this time has been well placed, as many of our leaders struggle for energy and time. The balance and purpose needed recalibration. This type of work needs intentional space, where the Spirit can breathe new life into us. It requires us to step away, step back and to then lean in to listen.

When we open space for God to work in our lives, even when it comes at a time when we're unprepared or perhaps even resistant, we become aware of just how important space for discernment is. Our lives and communities are fast becoming programmed out – that is, every hour of our day is scheduled to a point where we feel if there is an hour spare, it is wasted. Yet, this type of life leaves no room for rest, no room for inspiration, and no room for the sacred pause – the sabbath time. It is no mistake that for thousands of years the idea of rest and reflection has been a way of life for a variety of cultures - it works.

It's in this pause the *ruah*, or breath, can live into our lives. When we intentionally breathe the Spirit in, we are transformed and lifted into a place where we see with new eyes. Holding space open for the Spirit causes us to step away from our own ideas, our own challenges and our own social structure to imagine how we might create a world using God's will. This discernment takes practice! Our minds are strong, and so often it's only through time and prayer that we realise those moments we previously thought were inspired by God were indeed our own agendas.

As I enter this second period of pause, the winter rest, I invite you to join me. Be patient, as the work of discernment does not have a conclusion. We've paused for a short time, and now we need to ask again, where is the Spirit leading us? Who are we called to be? How are we called to engage with the communities around us and continue building the Kingdom of God on earth?

As we then move to physically reconnect with each other, may we do it with a sacred pause. May we step away from going back to the same program, the same structure with the same mindset and be reinvigorated by a sense of the Spirit breathing new life into us. May the first activities we have be ones where we give thanks and seek inspiration from God. As a movement, we are dynamic and fluid, which gives us the ability to change! Do we need to return to what we had, or can we be transformed into who God is calling us to be? Covid19 may have prevented us continuing to be the church we were, but it will not stop us being the movement we seek.

