

MOBILE THEOLOGY – WHERE R U?

Author: Christine Gapes

Contact the Author: christine.gapes (at) bigpond.com

This paper, presented at Seminar Week¹ in July 2005, explored the theme “mobile theology” through a focus on the theological connotations of the question “Where are you?” which God addresses to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3: 8-10). I rearticulated the question for two different audiences. Firstly, what happens if we ask you/th “Where r u? Secondly, how might those interested in youth ministry respond to the question, “Where r u?”

Where R U?

In 2001 I noticed that young people were no longer using the normal social etiquette for greeting people. When answering a phone, they asked “Where r u?” instead of the traditional “How are you?” Of course one of the reasons for this change was the move from land lines and stationary phones to the use of mobile phones which allowed young people to be located anywhere. Youth in Australia have adopted mobile phones in extraordinary numbers with a McNair Ingenuity Research² project in January 2003 reporting that:

1. Mobile phones are more commonly used by men (who are 30% heavier users of mobile phones than women) and, in particular, young affluent men.
2. Most people aged from 18 to 29 use a mobile phone daily and 95% of 18 – 29 year-olds have tried one.
3. Approximately 1/3 of Australians are regular users of SMS text messaging, and 1 in 6 sends SMS messages every day.
4. Text messaging is the domain of the young: on an average day in Australia, less than a quarter of Australians will send a text message, and only 3% of people aged over 60 will use SMS, but nearly 2/3 of people aged 18 to 29 will use SMS.

Children’s use of mobile phones is increasing dramatically as they are initiated into their use by parents who want to know “where they are” so they have easy access to them. A McNair Ingenuity Research on children’s use of mobile phones (April 2003) reported that:

1. One in four (25%) aged from 6 to 13 now have a mobile phone.
2. More than 90% of children aged from 6 to 9 have used a mobile phone, usually one belonging to their parents.
3. As children get older more of their friends have mobile phones which the children sometimes use, and over 1/3 of children aged from 10 to 13 have their own mobile phones.
4. Young girls are more likely to use a mobile phone than boys of the same age, and are significantly more likely to have their own mobile phones.

A Commonwealth Consumer Affairs Advisory Council³ in 2002 reported that mobile phones rank as probably the most important product for young people. Mobile phones symbolised freedom, growing up, excitement and having fun and were ‘must haves’ for teenagers wanting to achieve social acceptance. In keeping with their clientele, and for their sake, Youth Workers were some of the first church professionals to adopt the use of mobile phones in their ministry. They must be mobile – connecting to the youth culture and flexible in their working arrangements.

¹ Seminar Week is conducted by the School of Continuing Education and UTC in the NSW Synod.

² “The Social Impact of mobile phone use in Australia: a review of data sources.” Communications Research Unit, Dept of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Australian Government, 12 April 2005, p.6.

³ “The Social Impact of mobile phone use.”

Mobile phones have had a pervasive impact on Australian youth in terms of socializing, mobility and relationships. Since noticing the prevalence of this question of location, I have been eavesdropping on mobile conversations (especially while travelling in England).

- Sorry I'm on a train. The signal's weak. Can you ring back in an hour?
- We're leaving Winchester.
- We're stuck at Clapham Junction. The train has some problems.
- We're on the train. Can Dad pick us up at Christchurch?
- 5 minutes outside of Parramatta.
- Hi. I don't know. Yeah we're at the roundabout The big roundabout at Sopley.
... ok bye!

These quick, one sided train or bus mobile conversations are predicated on existing relationships and require context for the cryptic comments to be deciphered. Usually they are between parent and child, or partners with one waiting to collect the other, to begin the meal, to get ready to change shifts and exchange parental duties. Long conversations are not required on mobile phones that are used mainly for quick connections and emergency, geographic locaters, which according to an Ericsson survey on August 4, 2004, is the top service required by purchasers. Other services of interest were alerts, positioning (mapping), friend locator and video telephony.⁴ Hopefully deeper and more meaningful conversations are held elsewhere to build and maintain these relationships.

"How are you?" is a different kind of question, which, if it is to be asked and answered honestly, requires adequate time. It is a much more personal interrogation. I remember a very difficult period in my life when I hated this routine enquiry of "How are you?" because it was so often used as a pretext for people to slide into their own agendas. When queried, I would have to do a double think. Did they know that my mother had died last week in a horrible accident? If so, they must be interested in my spiritual or psychological welfare. If not, then I would have to decide whether I had the energy to tell them the gruesome details. Fortunately I rarely shared my personal story because the interval between questions was usually so short as to be embarrassing. One day I did respond to a casual request. As I walked down the corridor of the old Pitt St church office a woman I hardly knew asked "How are you?" Suddenly, I was annoyed by this paltry question and replied, "Not very well. My mother died last week." She had reached the end of the long corridor before I finished speaking and had to walk back to offer some semblance of care. I felt a little guilty that I had selected her to carry my anger but as a stranger she seemed a safer person upon whom I could download some of my grief and pain.

In this busy world, there is so little time for or interest in asking how people are because their responses too often would interfere with what we want to achieve and use up our valuable time. "Where are you?" seems to be an easier question to ask and answer. Young people can make nippy connections and locate themselves quickly in time and space before moving on to their next party or activity.

A Pause in Paradise

Yet, the question of location has deeper theological significance. "Where are you?" is the first question asked by God of human beings at the beginning of the biblical story.

Genesis 3: 8 - 9

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his [wife] hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

⁴ "The Social Impact of mobile phone use," p. 5.

But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, “*Ayecha?*”⁵ Where are you?”

I have never considered this question in this context before. Other aspects of the story - the serpent’s temptation of Eve and Adam, the Fall, and Expulsion from the garden - have taken precedence in sermons I’ve heard or commentaries I’ve read. God’s stroll in the garden belonged to a lost Miltonian Paradise. Theological overlays of the Fall, original sin and Eve’s complicity warp the picture and we are privileged no longer to experience that innocent walking with God.

Genesis 3: 9 But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?”

To whom does God address this question? In many ways God addresses us all through the narrative of Adam and Eve. Specifically in this paper I want to explore how this question is asked of youth and then of those who work closely with youth. I will use a broad definition of youth ministry to include children, adolescents and young adults. The age of “youth” varies in so many contexts and cultures that it is impossible to provide a neat definition⁶. Thus the reader will have to keep in mind the focal group with whom they work as they engage with this material. In the second paper, I will explore the question from the other side of the gate of Eden when young people cry “Where is God?”

Where are you/th? Missing in Action

To paraphrase **Genesis 3: 8 - 9**

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and young people hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

But the Lord God called to the young people, and said to them, “Where are you?”

The church often asks this question in third person rather than in second person because they have so little contact with young people. They ask “Where are *the* youth?” as they glance around empty pews. A second person request, “Where are *you*?” requires personal connection, proximity and permission. We have plenty of evidence that youth are not where we would like them to be. They are not filling the pews as they did in the 50s when the church was the only gig in town, where parents would allow youth to congregate, and where friends and activities could be found. The mythically large youth groups have disappeared. I don’t need to labour my point but simply assert a truth that is self evident to the point of melancholy. The statistics are depressing, even more so when they lead to visions and goals and strategies that imply that what we have done so far is fatally flawed.

***Where are you Youth?
Locating youth sociologically.***

In full time work + full time study + playing hard

*“We are a generation of spenders. We need to be cashed up for that.”
Priorities are a nice house, car, etc. These comments do not come from
a representative sample but the media sample is designed to influence
the consumer identity that feeds the economy.
(Daily Telegraph).*

⁵ Rabbi David J. Wolpe, *Floating Takes Faith: Ancient Wisdom for a Modern World*, Behrman House, 2004, p.xi.

⁶ For example in Tongan culture the term “youth” applies to anyone who is unmarried, even to 35 year olds.

Some churches are fortunate to have a few young adults in their midst but are in danger of pushing them out by their disheartening language. In one of the consultations I conducted at a local church, several young adults told me, "The only way you can get out of leadership positions in this church is to leave and go somewhere else." They were drained by carrying the leadership load and nearing burn out at 21. Why? Unlike the glory of the baby boomer days these young people need three jobs to pay for their tertiary education and have little spare time for volunteering. They are tired of plaintively asking "What about us?" as they quietly slip away. Instead of decrying the lack of young people in the church we might be better served if we "noticed" them, applauded their commitment and provided leadership development and mentoring.

Where are youth and why are they hiding? I could spend many pages outlining where youth have gone missing in action but that would be to answer this question with a physical location. Most of us at this conference know where youth are and can be found. Instead of locating youth in their geographical, educational, sociological, or media spaces⁷, and exploring the data on the decline of church attendance by youth, I will examine the deeper theological resonance of the question of location as it relates to youth in their wandering and searching. Physically, mentally, and spiritually young people are wandering around the world and tramping through a universe of assorted ideas, attempting to find their place in it and them. Dorothee Soelle⁸, describes her understanding of a personal transition from childhood to adulthood in terms of wandering:

"Perhaps it was not until I was twenty-seven years old and had a child that I became an adult, rooted in life. I have no name for the long interval that came before – this time of searching, waiting, and wandering. And did I wander! I went hiking, joined many walking tours, and travelled a lot. It was the unsettledness of youth and the romanticism of the formative years."

She captures the wandering and the wondering of youth who search for experiences and encounters, whether they are safe or dangerous. Adolescence and young adulthood are periods of searching, waiting and wandering/wondering for meaning, for relationships or reputation or a place in this world. It can be a restless period of wandering the world, particularly for young Australians, who go on the "Grand Tour" as a rite of passage - encountering diverse locations, experiences and perspectives. In contrast to their US cousins who establish their rights and independence by moving out of the family home and going to college (movies of frat life), Aussie youth pick up their back packs (carefully shrink wrapped now) and head to England, Asia or the Continent seeking the unknown and escaping the too-familiar.

Who told you/them you/they were naked?

Mobility is wonderful for opening young people's horizons but it may lead to alienation, estrangement and loneliness. Damon Albarn, the lead singer of Blur, wrote how the death of Kurt Cobain,

"showed me how fragmented the world is the rest of the time, and if there's a key to the Nineties I think it's that perpetual insecurity. Never have people thought so hard about their lives and come to such indecision, or felt further apart. We're powerless and confused – by politics and work and sex and even things like morality."⁹

⁷ For discussion of these complex contexts see various articles in the Journal of Youth Studies and Alissa Quart, Branded: the buying and selling of teenagers, Arrow Books, 2003.

⁸ Against the Wind: Memoir of a Radical Christian, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995, p.5.

⁹ Damon Albarn quoted by Grahame Cray, Postmodern Culture and Youth Discipleship: Commitment or Looking Cool? Grove Books, 1998, pp. 11-12.

James Fowler¹⁰, the faith development researcher, claims "...Many of today's youth approach their world and their sense of the future with what I call 'holocaust eyes'". He paints an apocalyptic vision for youth in America in which family fracturing and an almost anarchic climate of violence and drugs leads to a sense of hopelessness and exclusion. As we move into virtual reality, internet relating, and a being-less world, location details become more vital for our well-being. We are created of the earth and must stand our ground.

Genesis 3: 10 [Adam] said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself."

God calls "Where are you?" Why does the omnipresent, omniscient God ask this question? Surely God knows exactly where Adam and Eve are? God asks so that they (and we) might respond and name their (our) place. Yet, Adam does not answer with a location but designates a spiritual positioning which reveals his awareness of the fissure between good and evil in which he now stands. His eyes have been opened to the harm in the world and he no longer feels safe or secure.

God does not ask "What are you doing?" or "What have you done?" Rather, it is a positioning question. Where has this action placed you? This location is not a physical place (we already know Adam and Eve are hiding behind a tree) but a psychological and spiritual locating that reveals the splintering of relationship. Adam's answer indicates an awareness of how far they have moved away from the Creator who desires companionship with God's creatures.

Genesis 3: 11 [God] said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

Why are youth hiding? What are they hiding? Behind what are they hiding? Who has told youth they are naked?

Many young people hide because they feel vulnerable as they form new identities. They hide their feelings – afraid to be ostracised from their group, afraid to displease parents or friends. They hide in the group¹¹ taking on the clothing of their friends and the identity that provides some cover for the new self that is emerging. This new self seems so fragile, so easy to break, so volatile, and so sensitive to any criticism or ridicule. They hide behind their music (which speaks for them), their computers (which provide solitude), and behind friends (who give them a sense of belonging). They hide behind razor wire in Detention Centres bearing the guilt of parents who would dare to eat the fruit of a better life.

They conceal their hopes – afraid some will scoff. They hide inside their bodies – afraid of dimensions that do not please the harsh glare of the magazine camera. They wait in the closet as in the movie "Suddenly 30" for their dreams to come true, or hide in the closet even though gay and lesbian is the new black. They try to cover their ordinariness through make up, illusions of Big Brother and American Idol. They bury their lives under the cover of chimeras promulgated by media and corporations that devour them. They hide behind fake identities encoded by magazines like Dolly, Girlfriend, and sports magazines. They learn how to divine their lives through pop quizzes, astrology, and "colourstrology".

Overloaded by their fragility and vulnerability as they emerge from the safety of childhood self-centredness, adolescents learn that they are "bad". Following Augustine's declarations, but not his youthful experience, the church expose youth as "wicked," unruly, noisy, disruptive and urge them to cover their nakedness with sobriety. While youth enjoy the garden of life with hormones racing around their sensual bodies they are told by older people envious of their vitality that what they do and think

¹⁰ J. Fowler, "Perspectives on Adolescents, Personhood, and Faith", in Christ and the Adolescent: A Theological Approach to Youth Ministry, Institute for Youth Ministry, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1996, p.7.

¹¹ Robert Kegan, The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development. Harvard University Press, 1982.

is wrong. I have sat in many church Easter Camps and listened to the speaker list what is wrong with young people. The human condition is summarized as sinful and we are only released from this terrible situation by the sacrifice and death of Jesus Christ. These kinds of talks usually make a deep impression on young people who feel guilty enough about fights with parents, siblings and peers as well as burdened by expectations of school, society and church. They long to be forgiven and cleansed of their sins. I am not disagreeing with the need for such confessions, but would ask for the theology of creation to also inform our conversations with young people.

What kind of God makes you/th go missing? Who is our God?

When God asks “Where r u?” what tone does God use? What tone do youth hear? My Bible Study group (Years 7 & 8) hear an interrogating, angry and wrathful tone. They are used to a punishing god who demands retribution and is willing to sacrifice his own child unto death. When I asked them why Jesus had to die they reported their Scripture-class learned theology – to satisfy God’s wrath. As one Bible Study guide stated, “Jesus’ death will involve “drinking” all of God’s anger directed at us.”¹²

Adolescents, caught in their developmental struggle with parents, mimic the two year old’s struggle for assertion and independence. Many are used to the third degree grilling from parents and teachers who want to track down culprits so judgement and punishment can be meted out. If this is their view of God, no wonder they leave when this god calls? Like the lazy servant in Matthew 25: 24 – 25 they believe God is a mean God and they are afraid of his retribution. It is safer to hide from this God who can kill with a look or banish with a word.

Too often the church conveys God’s tone as one of anger and disappointment because of our view of God. We cannot hear God’s voice clearly because the filters of church tradition, society and our own imperfect upbringing distort God’s tone. Believing expulsion from the Garden of Eden is the fulcrum of Adam and Eve’s story, we are troubled by God’s voice. We don’t wait in the garden for God to walk towards us but rather hide with Adam and Eve behind their tree – full of anxiety, afraid of our nakedness, and aware of the precarious nature of living. With our knowledge of good and evil we imagine that we are masters of our own world, and “though we may be miserable masters of the universe, that illusion is self-protective, sentimental and comforting”.¹³

What kind of God is presented to young people? Too often in camp talks and school mission tours the image of a vindictive, vengeful God who is hunting for punishment and restitution is presented. God is set up as the “bad guy” of the Trinity so that groovy Jesus can be the young people’s friend, the good guy who will save them from the harsh Father God. No wonder young people refuse to step out from behind the tree and be interrogated by this dominating parent God! Who would want to meet this wrathful God? They don’t want to leave the safety of that hiding place which veils their nakedness, masks their feelings of sexual pleasure, and shrouds their pain and suffering.

In the Garden of Eden story, humans chose to know good and evil despite its consequences and thus splintered communal bonds established by and with God. Yet, the adolescent period is framed by relationships, in particular relationships among peers, but not discounting relationships between youth and their parents or significant others. David Tacey¹⁴ suggests that youth are interested in integration and wholeness – the reverse of what we try to do by establishing the great divide between God and ourselves as so many evangelical tracts attempt. Perhaps more than we realise youth are willing to be introduced to the Trinitarian God who is one of persons in relationship¹⁵ and we don’t have to scare the “crap” out of them before they will connect. We need to reclaim the two characteristics of

¹² For Christ’s Sake: Nailing Jesus through the Gospel of Mark, AFES, 1984, xxvi.

¹³ David Tacey, the Spirituality Revolution: the emergence of contemporary spirituality. HarperCollins, 2003, p. 117.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Daniel Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology, Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004 (2nd edition), p.77.

God which are used most often in the Psalms: steadfast love and faithfulness. We must connect them to this dependable God who will be there for them no matter what.¹⁶

Allow Elizabeth a 19 year old girl in David Tacey's university class to talk of the kind of God she is re-encountering:

"In these sentences I have revealed something which is extremely difficult and confronting to admit. I realise I do believe in an Other, in a sacred other. If I analyse my feelings thoroughly, I would probably conclude that it was God. The reason I put God on hold was because it is easier to live in the distractions of the secular without commitment or responsibility towards the sacred. To make that conscious choice is to admit my own weaknesses and frailty as a human being amid other human beings like me. It is to admit my dependence on a mystery and a beauty greater than myself."¹⁷

Points to Ponder:

The conference took a break at this juncture and, in small groups, considered the following questions:

1. *Where and how do you/th, young people hide?*
2. *Why do you/th, young people hide?*
3. *What kind of God do you present to you/th?*

Where R U? (Workers with Children, Youth and Young Adults?)

What kind of God we present to young people depends to a large extent on what kind of God we meet in the garden. Do we walk with God in the Garden or are we hiding behind the tree? Along with young people, we hear God's tone filtered by our hiding place. God's voice is muffled by our position on the swaying continuum between good and evil.

Where are youth workers hiding and why?

If we were to allegorize the Garden of Eden story and place Youth Workers in the midst of the action, what might they do with their treasured mobility? If we take the notion that ministers, like Adam and Eve, hide from God where would we find them? Habitually, youth workers hide behind their roles – large shop-front cut-out figures of heroic proportion. Many are fearful that someone will see that they do not fit the role and that they will never achieve the church's vision – it is too big for their puny size. Of course there are totally unrealistic expectations placed on them by the church – a more than full time position to be undertaken in 15 hours or less. Youth workers feel that they are expected to turn around the juggernaut ship, called the church, and head back to port where the mythical thousands of new passengers are waiting to board, if only the right gangplank can be let down. They dare not tell the church that no such grand supply of young people eager to join the church exists anymore. The photos on church walls of the 50s Sunday School picnics, the Crusader Camps and Christian Endeavour conferences will never again be seen. Who would go to poxy church events when fabulous ecstatic events are staged by Alice Cooper and Kylie Minogue? Youth workers hide behind their masks, hoping that no one will ask "where are the youth?"

Other ministers hide behind their roles – growing tired of asking the question "How are you?" because their lives are filling with administration minutiae. Numerous ministers are angry that no one asks them "How are you?" When I was Director of Field Education at UTC, much of my time was spent on

¹⁶ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church*, Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004, pp 73-92.

¹⁷Ibid., p.119

the phone in long conversations with supervising ministers who had few people with whom they could share the struggles and joys of their ministry. They were shrivelling up through lack of care.

Many people in full-time or part-time ministry are hiding behind busy-ness and have little time or space to chat with God. Our prayer life dwindles as we become absorbed by the numerous people demanding our care and the many tasks that must be completed. As we race to our next meeting, we mutter “I haven’t got time to converse with God. I’m too busy saving the world on God’s behalf to stop. I have too many things and too many people to help to stop and just sit.” We reflect only one aspect of the image of God who is acting in this world, and fail to mirror the resting God of Genesis 1. I remember my days at UTC when I was exhausted by the mountain of tasks I had to climb. No amount of working smarter or harder seemed to diminish the pile. Then I discovered two books that have helped me refocus the purpose and direction of my ministry. Firstly, Dorothy Bass¹⁸ drew my attention to the framing of “day” in Genesis 1:5, 8, 13, 19, and 23.

“God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.”

The refrain, “And there was evening and there was morning,” is well known to Jewish people who celebrate Sabbath from evening to evening. A “day” in Genesis consisted of evening and morning, not just the daylight hours. A “day” began with the evening not the morning. I had begun my day with morning, dragging the world onto my shoulders and hoping that God would catch up with me eventually. Bass’ book revolutionized my view of work and ministry. God is at work during the night and I awake in the morning to join God’s activity in the world.

A second book, by Wayne Muller¹⁹, reveals the increasing interest in Sabbath rest for weary ministry workers. I am a reforming workaholic and this book has in some ways saved my life. The opening pages set the rhythm for life as Muller gently breathed into my soul the truth that is hidden in the positive command to “Remember the Sabbath”. For a Protestant who claims (but does not live it) to be saved by grace and not by works, this book gave me new ways of seeing God’s world as one in which we celebrate the “kingdom of God” which is at hand, “at our fingertips”,²⁰ close enough to take hold of. Using Jewish, Buddhist and Christian wisdom Muller gently opens the soul to believing that taking Sabbath rest is not sinful but is actually demanded by God who takes rest and enjoys the fruits of creation. In simple one minute ways or through major retreats Muller shares both theological rationale and practical suggestions for the need for Sabbath rest in a world that is corrupted by greed and pride.

Bob Mayo, an Evangelical youth worker in Cambridge, presented a paper at the IASYM conference, January 2005, in which he suggested that youth workers, particularly Evangelical ones, are making “busyness” into a fetish²¹. He asserted that

“The idea that working long hours is the unavoidable and only way of expressing a Christian commitment leaves youth workers and church leaders feeling tired, stressful and sometimes even resentful. Youth workers are in the dreams business, helping young people to become the person they have inside them to be. This will not happen if what youth workers end up doing and what young people end up hearing is nothing more than a thinly disguised form of duty and obligation. It is bad practice but it also emerges out of muddled doctrine – doctrine shapes behaviour in the same way that ideas affect actions. This spiritualization of busyness comes out of what I am choosing to call, ‘redemptionitis’. ‘Redemptionitis’ is what happens when the incarnation of Jesus is focussed on to the exclusion of the doctrines of creation and eschatology.

¹⁸ Dorothy C. Bass, *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time*, Jossey-Bass, 2000.

¹⁹ Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: finding rest, renewal, and delight in our busy lives*, Bantam Books: New York, 1999.

²⁰ Henri J. M. Nouwen *Sabbatical Journey*, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998, p.207.

²¹ Bob Mayo, *Redemptionitis*, IASYM Conference, 4-7 January, London, UK.

This concern with over work and stress is a secular as well as sacred issue and appears in many reports on television and in daily newspapers. In one episode of *Monk*, the detective with an obsessive compulsive disorder was sitting in a park having just lost his job. This was a catastrophe. His whole world was now in chaos. He had no structure to his day and no purpose for his life. A park cleaner glared at him and demanded angrily, "What are you looking at? I used to earn \$250,000 a week." Monk enquired, "What happened?" The cleaner replied, "I went on vacation for a week and they found they didn't need me."

Many people in Australia work as if they are dispensable. Instead of being the land of the long weekend, surprisingly Australians now work some of the longest hours in the world (if we don't count the gargantuan and often futile loads of developing countries). Australia which fought for workers rights for appropriate and health maintaining holiday leave, is now in the forefront of industrial relations meltdown. Why? We have succumbed to the desire for more and more commodities. The leisure time predicted in the 70s has been eaten up by the blurred boundaries between work and home, by demands of bosses, and the subtle expectations of co-workers. Two years ago, one of my private students showed me a paper on flexible working hours presented by her work. At first glance it seemed to be suggesting a healthy balance of work and life. As I read on I was horrified. Flexible working hours in this document meant that all employees should be available for work 24/7. The provision of mobile phones and lap tops allowed constant contact between the work place and the employee, at any time of day or night. Few could resist this oppression for fear of losing their jobs.

Working for the church does not gain you more money or commodities but we are infected by the same poison. The church is mirroring the world in its business modalities rather than presenting an alternative life style. I hear many ministers and youth workers talk about how tired they are and how busy they are. We have our strategic plans and ten point goals but do we pause to pray long enough about what God wants us to do in this world. We are not living as if the kingdom of God was at hand, as if we were already living in it. Where does our anxiety come from? Does it emerge out of the comparisons we make to the wider world where success is more important than fruitfulness, individualism is stronger than community, and competition triumphs over compassion?²² Does our anxiety derive from mild or severe depression when we lose the energy of the Spirit?

I don't know what the answer is to the current malaise of the church. I think it is time for some of us to stop and see where we are. Do we want to be where we have rushed to? Or like the Road Runner, have we been so frantic in our running that we suddenly realise we are over the cliff, madly spinning our legs in mid air. The road runner stays aloft for a moment by the power of his actions and self-belief but when he realises where he is a horrified look on his face exposes his fear before he plummets.

What kind of God do we meet in the garden?

What kind of God do we meet in the garden? We meet the God who wants to accompany us in our work and later commands that we stop regularly for Sabbath rest (Gen 2:3; Exodus 20: 8-11; Exodus 35: 1-2; Lev 16: 29; Lev 19: 30; Lev 23: 3-8, 31-43; Lev 25; Lev 26²³; Deuteronomy 5: 12-15). The Sabbath is a prescribed time for stopping – of leaving everything unfinished so we are reminded that it is God's work that we do and it is God's breath that enlivens us. The idea of Sabbath rest is vividly portrayed by the Jubilee year.

"During this fallow time – an entire year of rest – the community relied upon whatever grew in their fields of its own. This served as a dramatic reminder that it was not their work alone, but rather God and the earth who fed them."²⁴

²² Nouwen, *Sabbatical Journey*, p.164, to paraphrase in reverse.

²³ I wonder what kind of church we might become if we followed the most repeated commands in Leviticus to remember the Sabbath so we can worship God rather than focussing on one or two texts in a sexuality debate.

²⁴ Muller, *Sabbath*, p.26.

This uncultivated period allowed the land to self-generate and required the people to eat what spontaneously grew. They were to eat from the land even though they did not till, plant or sow. Only as we too pause regularly for Sabbath rest can we be reminded that we harvest what our generous God provides and we lift our eyes from our myopic tasks to see God's horizon.

What kind of God do we meet in Genesis 1 and 2 as the story of the world unfolds? Four depictions of God are glimpsed in these early verses. God is a brooding, speaking, acting (or doing) and resting God. Brooding and resting images of God balance the speaking and doing with which we are familiar. The Spirit of God broods over chaos bringing forth creation. Later we see the God who walks with humans as well as judging their choices. Alongside the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, we see God involved in bringing new birth when Eve says, "I have produced a man [sic] with the help of God" (Genesis 4:1). The harsh strictures of birth and work may preoccupy us so much that we miss this little verse in which God's presence is celebrated in the midst of pain and toil.

God doesn't want us to be exhausted because we are locatable by phone at every moment of the day. To paraphrase Rev 3: 1-3 "I know your deeds/ works, you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead. I know you have worked hard. You have filled your diaries but you are really like the walking dead – not fully alive." We need to hear more clearly Rev 3:20 – "I will come in if you knock and sup with you." Note this verse does not say, "I will come in and give you a list of 5 goals for the next 3 years." Such a verse is counter-cultural to those places that demand success, efficiency and increasing numbers. The theme of hospitality is threaded through – a time to sit and eat with Jesus – to wait upon God and see in what direction we are being led. If we do not rest and recuperate, we will not be able to reflect a true image of God. If we do not stop our work, we go against God's command and will not succeed. In fact like the ancient Hebrews we may be dispersed so the land can enjoy the required Sabbath year and make up for those periods of rest that were lost (Leviticus 26).

Mobility is wonderful and essential for life, but becomes exhausting if we are constantly on the move. In our mad rush to prove our salvation, Sabbath rest is missing. In our kaleidoscopic chaos we miss the calm in which we hear God speak with encouraging and affirming tones, giving new direction and vitality. In Genesis 3, God walks in the garden. What a wonderful image of a Creator who wishes to commune with creation – to enjoy the creatures' company. God asks "Where R U?" because God does not find us where God expects us to be – waiting for companionship.

Too often as ministers we are no longer surprised by God's voice into self-revelation and self-discovery because we are too familiar with the Genesis story. But if we situate ourselves with Adam and Eve behind their protective tree we might once again hear the sound of God walking in the garden. What kind of God do you meet in the Garden?

Imagine a Garden

I want to change pace a little here and invite you to participate in an imagination exercise. Pause for awhile, close your eyes, relax and become conscious of your breathing. Allow your imagination to unwrap this Biblical text and immerse yourself in the story.

Imagine a garden. It might be a wild bush garden or a rainforest. It is late afternoon and the sun is gilding the tree tops, slanting bronze through the tree trunks to leave shadows that tell the time of evening is drawing near.

Imagine a garden created by God in the very early times – a wild lush garden full of trees laden with fruit. It is early evening a gentle breeze is wafting through the trees ... God is walking in the garden – to hear the bird song, to feel the cool of the evening, to accompany God's creatures.

What does God want to say to you? What does God want to talk with you about? What do you hear God say?

Now you hear a voice call “Where are you?”

What do you answer?

Pause for awhile in conversation with God in the garden.

Write down your thoughts, spend time in prayer or if the person next to you is not writing nor sitting with their eyes closed you might talk about the experience.

It’s been a hard day’s work

After a hard day’s work of tinkering with the Creation – putting a different spin on a planet here and shining a star or two – God returns to the Garden of Eden looking for some company. God wishes to taste the fruit of God’s creation and to walk in the cool of the evening with God’s speaking creatures to chat about the universe and their day. But Adam and Eve can’t be found. God calls out “Honeys I’m home! Where are you?” What was God going to say in the garden? What did God want to hear? What did God want to say? We have lost that opportunity in our desire to know good and evil and now we are acquainted with the curse of death.

Perhaps we are called to create a new garden, or sacred space, for young people in which they may rediscover their souls which must be nourished. Of course, that means youth workers and other ministers need to nourish our own souls as well. We need to rediscover the ecstatic experience of God that funds our ministry with youth. James Loder²⁵ remarks in his analysis of Kierkegaard’s conversion that “wind is apparently Kierkegaard’s metaphor for the presence of the Lord. For him, the wind of the Spirit brings cooling; it reconstellates the world and one’s place in it, so that now, contrary to all evidence of the flesh, even decrepit flesh becomes a bearer of the eternal promise of God.”

We will always live within the tension of moving and resting. We must stop regularly so we can hear God’s deep rhythm in the earth and in each other and then move on with renewed strength. Jesus was an itinerant preacher who within his constant mobility found times for stopping and for solitude. Healing, teaching and prophetic challenge are models of Jesus’ ministry as are pausing for prayer, contemplation and rest.

What kind of theology do we develop if we privilege God walking in the garden instead of hiding humans, downfall and expulsion? Where are you in terms of your communion with God? How rich is your prayer life? Are you walking in the garden with God or hiding behind a tree or too busy to even know where you are? Do you only operate in a post eviction location and see work or ministry as a burden with no time to halt and rest and wait upon God. We must take time to “notice” and “listen”. Doing theological reflection on the move requires resting time - to jot down what we have noticed, to record in some way what we have heard as we mingle with our youth and their families. We may not ask you/th directly “Where are you?” because such questions tend to make them hide and lead to monosyllabic answers (“Fine” “ok” “all right”) but we can contemplate our conversations with young people and their parents so we might allow space for the Spirit of God to guide us in the ways we might go.

Ending:

Abraham Heschel²⁶ says that God speaks slowly, one syllable at a time. It is not till the end of our lives that we can read backwards to see the sentences that have been created. It is not till the end of our lives that we read the grammar of our lives. I believe that youth workers and other ministers are

²⁵ James Loder, The Logic of the Spirit: Human Development in Theological Perspective, Jossey-Bass, 1998, p.235.

²⁶ Quoted in Wolpe, Floating Takes Faith, p.127.

to help young people hear well each syllable and to discover the syllables come from God. Sometimes they need help from adult guarantors of faith²⁷ to hear the syllable above the white noise and clutter of their daily world (school, music, friends etc all competing for their attention). I hope that at the end of your life you may look back and be able to read your life sentence and like Enoch and Noah, Ruth and Esther, may it read "Dave, Teresa, Rob, Brad, Karen walked with God.

²⁷ William Myers, Theological Themes in Youth Ministry, Pilgrim Press, 1987.