

Guest editorial: Everyone needs to go to Arabia

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One of the pressing concerns of 21st century individual and congregational spiritual life is the question of depth. To be blunt, there isn't much.



Bill Wilson

Study after study has revealed the sad truth that much of what we call faith and commitment actually is a thin veneer of religious ritualism that wilts at the first hint of stress.

It is stunning to watch long-term, regular participants in a congregation's life resort to all manner of psycho-babble or afternoon talk-show wisdom when confronted with a crisis. Every pastor has watched in dismay as life-long believers revert to their worst and darkest selves when things don't go their way.

The self-absorption of our culture has come to define our churches. Affluenza is not just a cute way to describe the American way of materialism. It is what robs would-be disciples of the joy of authentic stewardship of all our life and possessions. The list goes on and on.

Go to Arabia

I propose a cure for this “mile wide, inch deep” variety of faith that plagues Christ’s kingdom.

Everyone needs to go to Arabia.

Now, I am not a travel agent, and I get no kickback from the airlines. To fully appreciate this invitation, you must know your Bible trivia.

Specifically, what did Paul do after his conversion on the Damascus road? You’ll find that story in Acts 9. Christianity’s most ardent opponent, a genuine first-century terrorist, is dramatically converted and transformed. Think of a leading ISIS terrorist confessing Christ and leading the Christian church in the Middle East. Not surprisingly, other disciples are incredulous at this turn of events, and eventually, the church leaders send the newly-converted Paul away.

Where does he go? For the answer, one must turn to Galatians 1:17. He went to Arabia.

We are given no details of his time there. Much like the 18 years between the story of Jesus and his parents in the Temple and his baptism, we have a gap in the narrative. Paul was gone approximately three years. Many legends exist about his time in Arabia, but the biblical text is silent about what took place during those days.

We can only deduce what happened by the transformation that was obvious when he returned. Paul came back a different man. He left a zealot and returned a theologian. He left filled with raw enthusiasm and returned with passion for Christ’s kingdom. He left shrouded by doubt and returned grounded in conviction.

It seems clear that while in Arabia, Paul went deep.

Listening in Arabia

What will it mean for you or your church to go to Arabia? To go to Arabia means we must learn to listen to God's voice rather than his competition.

Henri Nouwen wrote about how difficult it is for us to hear the voice of God. He wrote of how we have become deaf, unable to know when God is calling us, and when we hear God, unable to know in what direction he is calling us.

Nouwen's description of modern life was that it has become absurd. Interestingly, the root word for "absurd" is the Latin word *surdus*, which means deaf.

Arabia is a place to listen for that voice you have been ignoring.

What would it look like for your congregation to go to Arabia? What would it look like for our clergy to go there?

Thinking in Arabia

Far too often, deep is the part of life we studiously avoid. It's so tempting to let others think for us, to settle for what comes easy, to walk away when things get a little complicated. To go to Arabia would mean we would have to think deeply, wrestle with God, and lean into our pain and shortcomings.

Sadly, that seems to be far down the list of priorities for most of us. Our congregational life is filled with pressure to produce, with incessant programs, with demanding consumers—parishioners—and with more noise than quiet.

For the sake of our congregational and individual health, we need a trip to Arabia.

Would you be willing to follow the example of Paul and Jesus and take some time away from the noise and the pressure and the whirlwind to listen for the voice of the Spirit calling you to a deeper life?

With a little more work on our foundations, perhaps we would not crumble so quickly under pressure. With a deeper reservoir of faith, perhaps we could exhibit an extra measure of grace to those around us. With a stockpile of thoughtful prayers, perhaps the crises we face would not overwhelm us so easily.

Everyone needs to go to Arabia.

This means you.

Bill Wilson is director of the [Center for Healthy Churches](#).