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The search for sanctuary

The book of Exodus offers detailed instructions for building a sanctuary, illustrating the timeless struggle of setting aside time and space for God, writes Christi O. Brown.

by [Christi O. Brown](#)



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It's the consummate conundrum for a Christian institutional leader: We preach that nurturing a spiritual life is imperative, yet we never find the time to practice what we preach. Every Thursday, I inevitably find myself struggling to determine if I have 30 minutes for chapel or if I have too much work to do. In the morning, do I hit snooze for 10 more minutes or get up to do a morning devotion? On the weekends, do I have time to call a friend for spiritual counseling? I am not alone in these struggles.

I met recently with experienced judicatory leaders from 10 denominations. Of all the common "hot topics" they identified to address, they decided to focus their energies on enriching their spiritual lives. These busy executives equip and provide resources for leaders within their respective denominations. They could have chosen to pursue a more complex topic to tackle together. Didn't these leaders, many of whom had pastored congregations, already know how to deepen their spiritual lives?

The answer, of course, was yes -- they did know how they should enrich their lives. It wasn't knowledge they lacked, but practice. They yearned deeply for sanctuary -- hallowed time and space set apart to pause and listen to God, to reflect on lessons learned and to grow spiritually. It is an unfortunate irony

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that in the all-consuming work of the kingdom of God, Christian leaders are left spent, wondering how we could possibly find the time to spend with God. Yet we simultaneously comprehend the calamitous consequences if we don't.

Interestingly enough, the Israelites found themselves in a similar predicament. They were a group transitioning from living a life of slavery to a life of freedom. They had a desert to wander and a promised land to seek. They had tents, spouses and children to move often, as well as water and food to find. When and how were they to spend dedicated time with God? Yet the entire story of Exodus is a movement from slavery to worship. One-third of the book of Exodus is devoted to tabernacle details and construction. The Lord realized the Israelites' acute need to have a sanctuary, a place set apart from the ordinary where they could connect with God.

In Exodus, the description and building of the sanctuary is interrupted only by the Israelites worshipping the golden calf. The Lord decides to punish the Israelites for worshipping a false idol in two ways: By sending a plague upon them and by refusing to accompany them on their journey. Remarkably, it was not the plague the Israelites mourned as much as the promise of land without the presence of God. They feared being indistinct without the Lord. There was a profound need for the presence and the favor of the Lord. Once Moses successfully intervened on behalf of the mourning Israelites, God renewed the covenant with Israel and allowed the tabernacle to be constructed.

In Exodus, detailed instructions explain how to build this sacred space, including exact cubit measurements. Yet what is most intriguing, as we consider sanctuary in our lives today, are the two requirements: It must be situated at the center and it must be set apart with an open space surrounding it. Sanctuary is a place centered, yet set apart, where we find and are found by God.

Like the Israelites in the midst of their quest for the promised land, can we incorporate sanctuary into our busy lives? How do we carve out the time and space required to honor our relationship with God? Christian institutional leaders live in a world that is overfilled. Our offices are cluttered, and our calendars are booked. Full of work for the kingdom of God, we rarely set apart time or space for our own spiritual practices. Yet honoring sanctuary in our lives offers us refuge from everyday life. Emptying ourselves, we are able to refuel on faith.

Exodus purposefully points us toward building sanctuary, suggesting the detailed practices that are required. For the Israelites, building the tabernacle was not simply one more thing to do in their already busy lives. It was an integral part of their quest for the promised land, ensuring the presence of the Lord would be with them in their journey. It was something they built together -- similar to the judicatory leaders working together -- drawing on the wisdom and practices of one other. Setting apart time and space to dwell with God and honor sanctuary in our lives, we Christian leaders can begin to actually live into practicing what we preach.