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Taking a Sabbatical

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When It's Time to Get Away

How to prepare your heart and mind for (temporary) separation from your church

By Maxie Dunnam

I was scheduled to get away from the church for two weeks—study leave and vacation. But I was a little uncomfortable as I got in my car.

As usual, I was leaving with a few ends not neatly tied up: some committees were in the middle of making important decisions, some people needed visiting in the hospital, and I wasn't sure how well the guest preachers I had lined up would be received.

On top of that, some people were not particularly happy with me—not a good situation for a pastor who had been at the church only about a year.

One of our part-time staff members was discovered to have cancer, and we had held a prayer service for her healing. Since healing services were something new to our church, some members, who were already questioning how Methodist their new minister was, saw this as the final straw.

Even though I felt unsettled, I was determined to get away. I rationalized to myself. *Everything will take care of itself.*

It's tough to get away from the church for vacation, study leave, or retreats. Many pastors feel a twinge of guilt leaving: Is this really going to be best for the church? Many members feel the church runs on three cylinders while we're gone. And if there's any trouble brewing, we're not sure what we'll come back to.

Still we know, from experience and from the advice of others, that getting away is absolutely vital. How to do it smoothly, with a minimum of disruption to the church, and productively, with a maximum of refreshment for me, is the question. Here are a few things I've discovered.

Periodic Pep Talks

When we're feeling the pressure of daily ministry, we're not inclined to plan a getaway. Or if we have planned one, as the time approaches, we begin wondering if it's an appropriate time to take off. We just can't imagine how the church can get along without us for two weeks!

Put that way it sounds silly, but when we're in that frame of mind, it seems to make sense. The best antidote to such thinking is to remind myself periodically of what getting away does for me and the congregation.

1. It renews my energy. Most of us get the physical rest we need; what we lack is emotional and mental rest. Just as farm fields are maximized by rotating crops, so a

change can refresh us. Winston Churchill said that a change is as good as a rest. I've found that to be true for me.

Change energizes me even when the change is demanding work. When I write for publication, for instance, the work is often painstaking, but it refreshes me. The interlude away from people and the intellectual challenge provide emotional refuge. I'm able to turn my mind away from weighty church problems, and it's not long before I feel lighter.

2. I see the big picture again. The obligations and demands of people in need, an organization to be led, and the weekly sermon to be created consume great amounts of energy. If I do not disengage, I soon begin to narrow my sights to what's around the next bend. I forget the long-range goal of the journey I'm on.

Times away, though, return my long-range vision. My study retreats, in which I plan out my sermons for six months to a year, strengthen me immensely even though they are hard work. Just seeing what I'll be preaching in the coming months makes me enthusiastic for the future.

3. I grow in my pastoral skills and confidence. One pastor I know was struggling with his preaching. His personnel committee had told him some months earlier to give his preaching more attention. He'd been reading and reflecting for months, but he wasn't sure he was making progress.

He decided to take a seminar in preaching. As part of the course, he was to write and present the first few minutes of a sermon. One seminar leader, one of the premier preaching professors in the nation, told him, "I can tell you're a good preacher." The pastor was elated. He knew he would never become superb, but he got the outside affirmation he needed to regain his confidence.

I take two two-week study leaves each year. My people are always excited and affirming when I return. They can tell the difference it makes in my preaching.

4. My passion for ministry is renewed. One youth pastor I know found himself becoming increasingly discouraged with his ministry. He couldn't point to anything specific, but he didn't seem to be enjoying it any longer.

When he told this to a group of colleagues he met with regularly, the first question they asked was, "Have you taken a day off lately?"

"Well, sort of," he replied.

"What do you mean 'Sort of'?"

"Well, I usually get part of Monday to play golf."

"But have you gotten any sustained break from ministry, for a minimum of 24 hours?" they pestered.

He said he hadn't, and they gently scolded him to do so.

Soon afterward, he found an old, beat-up, ten-speed bike at a garage sale. He put ministry on hold for about a week as he dismantled, sanded, and painted the frame, repacked the bearings and oiled the gears.

To this young man's surprise, he found his passion to fix a bike had fixed his lack of passion for ministry. Once again he was excited about his work with youth.

A deliberate break, even a short one, relieves us from the dullness-producing pressure of a demanding routine.

5. The congregation appreciates me more. The old adage is true: absence makes the heart grow fonder. Church members are happy for a break as well. They enjoy hearing another preacher or two: it's a new voice, with new inflection, and fresh illustrations! But the guests are not their pastor. And even though they happily live without him or her for a few weeks, that's the pastor they want back.

Break Signals

Given the nature of our work, we can't wait until we're exhausted and then just take off. Besides, I've found that physical fatigue isn't the only signal that I need an oasis. Still, we need to monitor our rhythms so that we can better plan our vacations and retreats. Here are signs that tell me I'm not getting enough time away.

• *Relational dullness.* I fail to pick up on people's emotions and relational signals. I lose my sensitivity to what people need and expect of me. I notice it first with my wife and then with staff.

Recently my wife asked when I had last seen Dr. Long, my ear-nose-and-throat specialist. My throat flares up now and then, especially when I'm under unusual stress and have a heavy speaking schedule. I assumed she was concerned about my throat.

When I told her I had been in to see him recently, she immediately asked, "Did he check your hearing?" She had spoken to me several times that night, and I had not responded. She was naturally concerned.

The problem was not my hearing, however, but my dulled sensitivities. Times like these are sure signs that I need a change of pace.

• *Mental sluggishness.* My thoughts come slowly; I'm not creative; I lack enthusiasm for even my favorite activities. I even find it difficult to participate in normal conversation.

This year we inaugurated a new leadership/management style in our church. Our administrative board is the ruling body of the church and numbers 155, but since we had found that group too cumbersome, we instituted a new working group of fifteen, an executive committee.

At the first meeting I was sluggish in sharing the vision. The meeting lacked life and direction. I thought. *Boy, we may have made a big mistake in instituting this new style of administration.*

The second meeting, however, was a joy. The people were excited. We made three big decisions. There was a sense of spiritual discernment and openness.

I reflected later on the difference. I had been worn-out at the first meeting. I had come through our General Conference (regional denominational meeting) which had been a pressure-cooker. I had been mentally and physically exhausted. Before the second meeting, I had had a few days off, had gone to three movies in a week, and was fresh in mind and body.

Overcoming the Difficulties

Getting away is never easy. The pulpit needs to be filled. Emergencies that need the pastor arise. Decisions must be delayed. Staff and volunteers must shoulder extra work. Here's how I deal with these inevitable difficulties.

• *Manage the guilt*. The book title *When I Relax, I Feel Guilty* expresses the feelings of many pastors. Most pastors with strong work ethics can't help but feel guilty stepping out the door. It may be neurotic guilt, but it's there nonetheless.

Generally, I've learned to dissipate this type of guilt by simply reminding myself of the hours I've been putting in as well as the Lord's permission, nay *command,* to take periodic rest.

But I still feel guilty when my schedule gets so contorted that I'm out of the pulpit for three or more Sundays in a row. That's when it's most inconvenient for the church. And lay leaders rightly worry about visitors who come and don't get to hear me preach.

This past summer I was away for five straight weeks, and that's just too long. But there was nothing I could do about it. All I could do was make a note to myself to be especially watchful to minimize consecutive Sundays out of the pulpit.

• *Handle the serious emergencies*. Most emergencies (illnesses, operations, deaths) can be handled by other staff members or clergy from nearby churches. But I've always had a special concern about being out of town when a longstanding member becomes gravely ill or dies. I've finally decided that, if at all possible, I'll return for the funeral.

Sometimes that requires a little creativity. Recently I was teaching at a seminar in Florida when the Bible teacher in our day school, around whom the day school revolved, died after a long battle with cancer. I was torn about what to do, but it turned out that I was able to shift my final presentation so that I could conduct this woman's funeral.

• *Expect to do double duty before and after.* Especially in a smaller church, where the pastor is the hub of the wheel, everything from getting the front door unlocked on Sunday morning to making sure the mortgage gets paid can be a vital concern while the pastor's away.

Hard work before leaving and when I return is the only way to prevent problems and slip ups. That means I line up guest preachers; I make sure someone oversees the Sunday morning worship routines; I line up staff or colleagues from other churches to make hospital calls, if necessary; I check with committee chairpersons about any input

they need from me; I temporarily cancel some activities that absolutely need my presence; I brief my secretary on correspondence that needs to be taken care of without me; and on it goes. It's exhausting just remembering what I have to do.

At times, this doesn't seem fair. It's like I'm paying double for a time away that is part of my contract. But I've come to see that is just the nature of pastoral getaways.

Making the Most of Getaways

While I was pastoring in Southern California, I once drove several hours to a mountain cabin. I was eagerly looking forward to a mini, three-day study leave. As I unpacked the car upon my arrival, I discovered I had forgotten all my resources and study books. I didn't even have a Bible!

Fuming inside, I debated whether to make the four-hour round trip for the books. Finally I decided to stay and simply rest, reflect, pray, and meditate. That trip turned out to be one of the most creative times in my entire life.

The fact that I didn't have books forced me to pursue another agenda, and that turned out to be what I needed more than anything. It was the first time I had experienced a retreat of solitude and prayer. With nothing to read, I could only reflect, pray, be silent, and write. This was such a spiritually renewing experience that ever since, I have regularly taken similar 24- to 48-hour renewal retreats.

That experience serendipitously taught me that as important as it is to have a plan of attack when I get away, I can gain a great deal if I remain open to whatever the experience hands me.

That being said, I still feel that planning well each type of getaway tends to ensure greater success. Here are some of the types of getaways I take and how I arrange them to benefit me the most.

• *Study retreats.* I schedule two, two-week study periods each year (one Sunday is missed each time), one around Labor Day weekend and the other usually just before Lent. My study retreats are dedicated solely to researching and preparing sermons. I take three or four boxes of books and files, and for 15 hours a day I read, outline, and write messages.

My schedule on these retreats is flexible, to make the most of my energies and concentration. Some nights, if I'm on a roll, I'll study until three in the morning and then sleep in. Other nights I'll eat a nice dinner, take a long walk, go to bed, and then hit the books at six in the morning. I often take long walks as breaks.

Usually I hole up in a condominium where I know I'll be isolated. Sometimes my wife accompanies me, but if so, she has her own projects.

I don't do any general reading during study leaves. All my time and energies are focused on the sermons for the months ahead. In my normal schedule, I keep books and magazines nearby and read snatches here and there.

• *Spiritual renewal.* As I mentioned above, I now schedule a time for concentrated spiritual reflection every three to four months. For me a spiritual renewal is a day or two in which I attempt to rest physically while focusing my attention spiritually.

Most of my time is spent assessing myself: what's going on in my family and my life, how I feel about my ministry. I think about what directions I need to be going and decisions I need to make. Such reflection is part of my nightly routine, but these little retreats give me a chance to go much deeper.

For my spiritual retreats to be effective, I've found it essential to get away from the house. My study is at home, equipped with a phone, of course. If I stay home, I invariably end up at my desk working on a sermon or some writing project, or I will be interrupted by a call. I need isolation; I need to cocoon so that later I can fly.

Recently I was asked to consider another ministry position. I wrestled with the decision for months but couldn't get a clear direction. Two weeks before I was to respond, I took off for a prayer retreat, alone. I did not see another person for 48 hours.

During that time I felt a clear direction from the Spirit that I was not to make the move. Without that retreat, I'm not sure I would have had the discernment needed.

• *Days off.* Thursday is my set day off, but I take that perhaps once a month. Instead, on Saturday mornings I try to finish last-minute preparations for the Sunday service, reviewing the liturgy, Scripture readings, and hymns—no sermon preparation, though—and then relax for the rest of the day. So, weekly I take about three-fourths of a day off. In addition, every six weeks or so I will take a two-day trip to see my parents.

Having an enjoyable activity—Churchill's change that refreshes—is important for my time off. In California, my hobby was sailing. Lately Jerry and I have taken up visiting estate sales and auctions, and I have started collecting art, both for pleasure and investment.

But my rhythms and habits have changed over the years. When my children were living at home, I was more careful to mark out a day to be with the family. When the kids were smaller and we lived in California, I would pick them up from school on Friday, and two times a month we would go to the beach, camping in our little trailer, returning Saturday evening.

• *Family holidays and vacations.* My holidays and vacations revolve around family rituals. Someone said that love is half history and half intuition. When our children (my youngest is now 26) get together to reminisce, more than anything they talk about the rituals.

They remember that when we lived in California, every summer we'd drive cross country back to the South to visit both sets of grandparents. Our children recall how we would stop at one public pool in Arizona so that they could swim.

Each year we also took a "snow vacation," traveling to the mountains two hours north of us to one of our church camps that was not in use at that time. Every Thanksgiving

while in California, we spent time with two pastors' families, and we would always have a touch football game on Thursday afternoon. The memories of these rituals have become some of the glue of our family. They've also been some of the fuel that has energized my ministry.

In addition to vacations, I try to take advantage of conferences or special trips. This summer I will be involved in a meeting in Bulgaria, so Jerry, my wife, is coming with me. We'll take a week of vacation after the meeting is over.

In addition to defraying some travel expenses, the initial time spent in a meeting helps to begin the process of disengagement from church obligations, so that when the vacation starts, I can more quickly enjoy myself.

If I've had a good break from ministry, when I return to the church it takes me a while to get back into the routine. But invariably the juices start flowing once I return to the pace of ministry. The shepherd's staff feels comfortable in my hand, it tastes sweet to stand in the pulpit, and I once again relish the call God has placed on my life.

—*MAXIE DUNHAM*

Discuss:

1. Do you need to find more opportunities to get away?
2. Because it's often necessary to do extra work before and after a vacation or break, are you deterred from planning a getaway?
3. By not making time to get away, have you been too sluggish, disinterested, or exhausted to be the leader your church needs and expects?

Reflecting on the Issue

Decide where you stand concerning the statements below.

	True for me	Not true for me	I'm not sure
My energy level is as high as ever	❑	❑	❑
I don't spend time wishing I could get away	❑	❑	❑
People can see my enthusiasm for ministry	❑	❑	❑
I have a clear vision for the future of my ministry	❑	❑	❑
I effectively balance my responsibilities at church and home	❑	❑	❑
My family can see my passion for ministry	❑	❑	❑

Desert and Harvest

The bounty of a sabbatical goes beyond mere time away.

By Eugene H. Peterson

We were both apprehensive, my wife and I. We had been away from our congregation for 12 months, a sabbatical year, and we were on our way back. It had been a wonderful year, soaking in the silence, gulping down great drafts of high-country air. Could we handle the transition from the solitude of the Montana Rockies to the traffic of Maryland?

Being a pastor is a difficult job, maybe no harder than any other job—any job done well requires everything that is in us—but hard all the same. For a year we had not done it: no interruptive phone calls, no exhilarating/exhausting creativity at pulpit and lectern, no doggedly carried out duties. We played and we prayed. We split wood and shoveled snow. We read and talked over what we read. We cross-country skied in the winter and hiked in the summer.

Every Sunday we did what we had not done for 30 years: we sat together and worshiped God. We went to the Eidsvold Lutheran Church in Somers with 70 or 80 other Christians, mostly Norwegians, and sang hymns that we didn't know very well. Pastor Pris led us in prayer and preached rich sermons.

Comfortable in the pew on an April Sunday, I had an inkling of what the pastor had been doing that week—the meetings he had attended and the crises he had endured. While the Spirit was using his sermon to speak quite personally to me, at the edges of my mind I was admiringly aware of the sheer craft, exegetically and homiletically, behind it. Then, as people who sit in church pews often do, I mentally wandered. How does he do that week after week? How does he stay so fresh, so alert, so on target, so alive to people and Christ? And in the midst of all this stress and emotion and study and ecclesiastical shopkeeping? That's got to be the toughest job on earth—I could never do that. I'm glad I don't have a job like that. And then I realized, *But I do have a job like that; that is my job—or will be, again, in a few months*.

Those "few months" were now whittled down to "next week." We weren't sure we were up to it. Maybe the sabbatical instead of refreshing us had only spoiled us. Instead of energizing, maybe it had enervated us. For 30 years we had lived a hundred or so feet down in the ocean of parish life (how much pressure per square inch is that?) and for a year of sabbatical we had surfaced, basking in the sun, romping in the snow. Deep-sea divers enter decompression chambers as they leave the depths, lest they get the bends. We felt an equivalent need for a "recompression chamber" as we returned to the depths.

From Montana to the East Coast, Interstate 90 stretches out an inviting beeline, nearly straight, with a couple of sweeping curves (but bees also buzz curves). But we veered off on a detour south to the high desert of Colorado for a four-day retreat at a monastery. The monastery, we hoped, would be our recompression chamber. It was not as if we hadn't had time for prayer. We had never had so much time for it. But we sensed the need for something else now—a community of prayer, some friends with a vocation for prayer among whom we could immerse our vocation as pastor.

So for four days we prayed in a community that prayed. The days had an easy rhythm: morning prayers in the chapel with the monks and other retreatants at 6 o'clock; evening prayers at 5 o'clock; before and after and in between, silence-walking, reading, praying, emptying. The rhythm broke on Sunday. After morning prayers and the Eucharist, everyone met for a noisy and festive breakfast. The silence had dug wells of joy that now spilled into the community in artesian conversation and laughter.

When we left the monastery the Montana sabbatical year was, as we had intended in our praying, behind us emotionally as well as geographically. Three days later we arrived in Maryland, focused and explosive with energy.

Stimulus for Sabbatical

The idea for a sabbatical developed from a two-pronged stimulus: fatigue and frustration. I was tired. That's hardly unusual in itself, but it was a tiredness that vacations weren't fixing—a tiredness of spirit, an inner boredom. I sensed a spiritual core to my fatigue and was looking for a spiritual remedy.

Along the way as a pastor, I had also become a writer. I longed for a stretch of time to express some thoughts about my pastoral vocation, time that was never available while I was in the act of being a pastor.

A sabbatical year seemed to serve both needs perfectly. But how would I get it? I serve a single-pastor church, and there was no money to fund a sabbatical: Who would replace me while I was away? How would I pay for the venture? The two difficulties seemed formidable. But I felt that if the sabbatical was in fact the spiritual remedy to a spiritual need, the church ought to be able to come up with a solution.

I started by calling several of the leaders in the congregation and inviting them to my home for an evening. I told them what I felt and what I wanted. I didn't ask them to solve the problem, but asked them to enter into seeking a solution with me. They asked a lot of questions; they took me seriously; they perceived it as a congregational task; they started to see themselves as pastor to me. When the evening ended, we had not solved the difficulties, but I knew I had allies praying, working, and thinking with me. The concept of "sabbatical" filled out and developed momentum. Over a period of several months the "mountains" moved.

Replacement: This turned out to be not much of a difficulty at all. My denomination offered help in locating an interim pastor—there are quite a few men and women who are available for just such work. We decided finally to call a young man who had recently served as an intern for a year with us.

Funding: We worked out a plan in which the church paid me one-third of my salary, and I arranged for the other two-thirds. I did this by renting out my house for the year and asking a generous friend for assistance. We had a family home on a lake in Montana where my parents, now deceased, had lived and we had always vacationed. It was suited to our needs for solitude, and we could live there inexpensively.

Detail after detail fell into place, not always easily or quickly, but after ten months the sabbatical year was agreed upon and planned. I interpreted what we were doing in a letter to the congregation:

"Sabbatical years are the biblically based provision for restoration. When the farmer's field is depleted, it is given a sabbatical—after six years of planting and harvesting it is left alone for a year so that the nutrients can build up in it. When people in ministry are depleted, they also are given a sabbatical—time apart for the recovery of spiritual and creative energies. I have been feeling the need for just such a time of restoration for about two years. The sense that my reserves are low, that my margins of creativity are crowded, becomes more acute each week. I feel the need for some 'desert' time—for silence, for solitude, for prayer.

"One of the things I fear most as your pastor is that out of fatigue or sloth I end up going through the motions, substituting professional smoothness for personal grappling with the life of the Spirit in our life together. The demands of pastoral life are strenuous, and there is no respite from them. There are not many hours in any day when I am not faced with the struggle of faith in someone or another, the deep, central, eternal energies that make the difference between a life lived to the glory of God and a life wasted in self-indulgence or trivialized in diversions. I want to be ready for those encounters. For me, that is what it means to be a pastor: to be in touch with the Lord's Word and presence, and to be ready to speak and act out of that Word and presence in whatever I am doing—while leading you in worship, teaching scripture, talking and praying with you individually, meeting with you in groups as we order our common life, writing poems and articles and books.

“It is in this capacity for intensity and intimacy, staying at the center where God’s Word makes things alive, that I feel in need of repletion. The demands are so much greater today than they were in earlier years. One of the things that 23 years of pastoral life among you means is that there is a complex network of people both within and without the congregation with whom I am in significant relationship. I would not have it otherwise. But I must also do something to maintain the central springs of compassion and creativity lest it all be flattened out into routines.

“Parallel with this felt need for ‘desert’ time, I feel the need for ‘harvest’ time. These 23 years with you have been full and rich. I came here inexperienced and untutored. Together, taught by the Spirit and by each other, we have learned much: You have become a congregation; I have become a pastor. During this time, I realized that writing is an essential element in my pastoral vocation with you. All of the writing comes out of the soil of this community of faith as we worship together, attend to Scripture, seek to discern the Spirit’s presence in our lives. As I write, a growing readership expresses

appreciation and affirms me in the work. Right now, so much that is mature and ripe for harvest remains unwritten. I want to write what we have lived together. I don't want to write on the run, hastily, or carelessly. I want to write this well, to the glory of God.

"Jan and I talked about this, prayed together, and consulted with persons whom we hold to be wise. The obvious solution was to accept a call to another congregation. That would provide the clean simplicity of new relationships uncomplicated by history, and the stimulus of new beginnings. But we didn't want to leave here if we could find another way; the life of worship and love that we have developed together is a great treasure that we will part with only if required. We arrived at the idea of the sabbatical, a year away for prayer and writing so that we would be able to return to this place and this people and do our very best in ministry with you.

"So, a desert time and a harvest time, time for prayer and time for writing, the two times side by side, contrasting, converging, cross-fertilizing. Many of you have already given your blessing and encouragement in this venture, affirming our resolve in taking this faith-step, being obedient to God in our lives."

Structure for the Sabbatical

And so it happened. Twelve months away from my congregation. Twelve months to pray and write, to worship and walk, to converse and read, to remember and re-vision.

From the outset we had conceived of the sabbatical as a joint enterprise, meeting a spiritual need in both pastor and congregation. We didn't want the year to be misinterpreted as an escape; we didn't want to be viewed as "off doing their own thing." We were committed to this congregation. The sabbatical was provided to deepen and continue our common ministry. How could we convey that? How could we cultivate our intimacy in the faith and not have the geographic separation separate us spiritually?

We decided to write a monthly "Sabbatical Letter" in two parts, "Jan's side" and "Eugene's side." We sent a roll of film along with the letter; a friend developed the pictures of our life that month and displayed them in the narthex. The letters and pictures did exactly what we had hoped. But only one side of the letters seems to have been read closely—Jan's. I couldn't quit preaching. She conveyed the sabbatical experience.

Brita Stendahl wrote once that the sabbatical year she and her husband, Krister, had in Sweden "gave us our lives back." Jan's side of the sabbatical letters revealed that dimension of our year for our worshiping and believing friends at home.

Once we arrived in Montana, we established a routine to support our twin goals of desert and harvest so that we would not fritter away the year. We agreed on a five-day work week, with Saturday and Sunday given to playing and praying. I worked hard for about five hours a day at my writing desk and then relaxed. We had evening prayers in the late afternoon and followed that by reading aloud to each other and fixing supper. After nine months of this, I had the two books written that I had set out to complete (the "harvest"). From then on it was all "desert"—reading and praying and hiking.

Refit for Ministry

Everything I had hoped for came to pass: I returned with more energy than I can remember having since I was 15 years old. I have always (with occasional, but brief, lapses) enjoyed being a pastor. But never this much. The experience of my maturity was now coupled with the energy of my youth, a combination I had not thought possible. The parts of pastoral work I had done out of duty before, just because somebody had to do them, I now embraced with delight. I felt deep reservoirs within me, capacious and free flowing. I felt great margins of leisure around everything I did—conversations, meetings, letter writing, telephone calls. I felt I would never again be in a hurry. The sabbatical had done its work.

A benefit I had not counted on was a change in the congregation. They were refreshed and confident in a way I had not observed before. One of the dangers of a long-term pastorate is the development of neurotic dependencies between pastor and people. I had worried about that from time to time: Was it healthy of me to stay in this congregation for so long? Had I taken the place of God for them?

Those fears became more acute when I proposed the sabbatical year, for many people expressed excessive anxiety—anxiety that I would not return, anxiety that the church could not get along without me, anxiety that the life of faith and worship and trust that we had worked so hard to develop would disintegrate in my absence. None of these fears was realized. Not one. Not even a little bit. The congregation thrived. They found they did not need me at all. They discovered they could be a church of Jesus Christ with another pastor quite as well as they could with me. I returned to a congregation confident in its maturity as a people of God.

A recent incident, seemingly trivial, illustrates the profound difference that keeps showing up in a variety of situations. About 25 of us were going on an overnight leadership retreat. We had agreed to meet in the church parking lot at 5:45 to car-pool together. I made a hospital visit that took longer than planned, and arrived five minutes late—to an empty parking lot. They had left me. Before the sabbatical, that would never have happened; now that kind of thing happens all the time. They can take care of themselves and know that I can take care of myself. Maturity.

We are both, the congregation and I, experiencing a great freedom in this: neither of us neurotically needs each other. I am not dependent on them; they aren't dependent on me. That leaves us free to appreciate each other and receive gifts of ministry from each other.

— EUGENE H. PETERSON

Discuss:

1. If you start feeling like you are in need of a sabbatical, how would you communicate that to your church?
2. As the pastor, do you worry that the church relies on you too much? Does that make it harder to get away?
3. Do you feel like churches should fund sabbaticals? Or, like Peterson, would you be willing to accept a third of your salary during your sabbatical time?

Applying the Lessons

When considering a sabbatical, how much emphasis do you place on the following elements?

	Not Enough	An Adequate Amount	Too Much
1. What church members will think of me	❑	❑	❑
2. Whether the church will suffer without me	❑	❑	❑
3. Whether the church will decide it doesn't need me	❑	❑	❑
4. How a sabbatical might affect my finances	❑	❑	❑
5. How a sabbatical might affect the church's finances	❑	❑	❑
6. What I will do to maximize the benefit of my sabbatical	❑	❑	❑
7. How God wants me to spend this time	❑	❑	❑
8. What will be most beneficial for me—and for the church	❑	❑	❑
9. What will change after I return	❑	❑	❑

Unusual Sabbaticals: Reflection, Relationships, and Listening to God

A good sabbatical requires stopping long enough to look around and see God in a new way.

By Lynne M. Baab

Denise, in her mid-fifties, has been a full-time children's ministries director for most of her career. She has had two sabbaticals. In the mid-1990s, a few months before her first sabbatical, the senior pastor at her church invited her into his office and asked if she had any ideas for her sabbatical.

Since childhood, Denise had dreamed of visiting New Zealand. She had never wanted to cram a trip to New Zealand into a vacation because, if she were going to fly that far, she wanted to stay a while. She also wanted to savor the planning and reentry stages. She thought a sabbatical would be perfect for a leisurely trip.

The Godly Play program, which Denise led at her church, frequently drew on the sheep and shepherd stories in the Bible. Denise had always wondered if observing sheep might teach her something about trusting God more deeply as her shepherd and might also bring something new to her leadership of Godly Play. She thought New Zealand would be a perfect place to observe sheep and their habits, as well as shepherds and their challenges.

So she answered the senior pastor's question by saying that she would like to visit New Zealand and study sheep. He told her that she needed to do something more academic.

"I'm exhausted," she found herself thinking. "The last thing I want to do is more work."

Nonetheless, Denise dutifully planned a research trip to eight congregations, where she asked questions about the way the congregations integrated children into worship. She wrote an eight-page report after the trip. The biggest blessing of that sabbatical was that she got a lot of sleep in the midst of her travels and interviews.

Two years ago, when her second sabbatical was approaching, she began thinking of what she might study this time. She was now working at a different church, and the senior pastor there, Rod, asked her if she had any ideas of what she might do for her sabbatical. She began describing a few possible research topics. He interrupted her and said, "A sabbatical should be about stopping being productive. It should focus on rest and renewal."

She was incredulous. "You mean I can go to New Zealand and look at sheep?"

Denise and her husband spent a month in New Zealand. Just as she had hoped, she allowed a couple of weeks at the beginning of the sabbatical to decompress from work

and plan the trip. After the trip, she again allowed time for reflection before reentry into work.

She and her husband spent the first few days of the trip in a cabin on a sheep farm, sitting on the front porch observing sheep. They had good conversations about sheep and shepherding with the farmer and his family. Throughout the rest of the trip, as they travelled around New Zealand, they saw and photographed sheep in a variety of settings.

"God speaks to me through creation," says Denise. "On my first sabbatical, I traveled mostly to urban areas to do interviews, and nothing in those environments spoke to me about God. The beauty of New Zealand drew me closer to God. I also love being in different cultures. Experiencing God's kingdom and God's people in another culture helps me experience the bigness of God and get outside my little American mindset."

Before, during, and after the trip to New Zealand, Denise attended a variety of churches on Sunday mornings—solely for the purpose of worship. On her first sabbatical, she had attended a variety of churches to study them, so she had had to put herself in analytical mode every Sunday. On her second sabbatical, she simply worshipped, which was deeply renewing for her.

At the churches she visited in New Zealand, she loved meeting the people and talking with them about their lives and their faith. She found those conversations to be inspiring and deeply moving.

One of Denise's former co-workers had moved to New Zealand, and Denise and her husband were able to visit that friend. It proved to be an unexpected blessing, because Denise was able to talk about issues related to her work with someone who understood the culture of her particular congregation.

The entire sabbatical was "all about going deeper with God," she remembers. Spending those days on a sheep farm and then observing sheep all over New Zealand spoke to her about God's peace. Sheep aren't anxious! All they do is eat, which spoke to her about the need to feed herself from God's Word as frequently as possible. The baby lambs jumping and dancing spoke to her of joy in Christ. Denise notes, "I get lost, I wander away, just like sheep. Watching sheep encouraged me to laugh at myself, and not take myself so seriously."

Denise's sabbatical enabled her to fulfill a long-held dream, and it enabled her to get the rest and renewal in Christ necessary for returning to work with a full heart. Her unusual sabbatical was possible because of the vision of her senior pastor, Rod, who had experienced an unusual sabbatical two years earlier.

An Extended Sabbath

Rod divided his sabbatical into three parts. The first part was an extended family vacation to Washington, DC, and London. They visited museums and attended worship in a variety of well-known churches. He viewed it as the trip of a lifetime, possibly the last trip with all of his children. Because his kids were teenagers, they did many activities on their own, freeing him to read and reflect when he wanted to.

The second part of his sabbatical was a month at a vacation home about an hour from his own home. His wife and children came and went, but he stayed there, reading and writing. His writing focused on true stories from life and ministry, and the writing enabled him to look back on his work, consider the hand of God in his life and in others' lives, and gain some closure.

For the third part of his sabbatical, he visited three men whom he had always admired. He simply wrote to them and asked whether, if he stayed in their vicinity for a few days, they would be able to give him some time to talk with them. In all three cases, the men met with him more than once for free-ranging discussions about faith and ministry.

Rod says he is now viewed as a bit of an expert on sabbaticals because of his own unusual and deeply satisfying sabbatical choices. He has been asked to speak about sabbaticals in several settings. He is disappointed that so few churches have sabbatical policies, and the ones that do often treat sabbaticals as one more arena for production, requiring classes and reports.

"The overarching theme of my sabbatical," he notes, "was an extended Sabbath. No productivity required. I didn't cram in too many things. Everything had space around it. I didn't take on the weight of producing anything. It was truly time away, truly Sabbath time."

Bicycles and a Quilt

Reflection, relationships, and drawing near to God were themes for both Denise's and Rod's sabbaticals. Two other unusual sabbaticals offer models for the kind of reflection that helps people evaluate their lives and see God's hand in it.

Michael experienced significant burnout in ministry several years ago and went on medical leave. A couple of years after his return to the church, he was eligible for a sabbatical. He wanted to reflect deeply on the turmoil of his past few years, but he also wanted to get out in nature and use his body. So he recruited a few men to accompany him on a five-day bicycle ride on a trail a few hours from his home.

Michael studied an online map showing the terrain of the bike trail and wrote reflection questions for each day based on the geographical features of the trail. When the trail went through a tunnel, his questions focused on times of darkness and what a person might learn when they can't see the light ahead. When the trail came out into an open space, he asked questions about the times when life feels open and wide and expansive. He reflected on these questions both before and during the bike ride.

Another creative example of sabbatical reflection comes from a woman minister who used her sabbatical to make a quilt. Each quilt square captured a significant event in her journey of faith, so she sewed her life with God into that quilt.

Sabbatical and *Sabbath* come from the same Hebrew root, which means stop, cease, desist, pause, or rest. A good sabbatical will involve stopping long enough to look around and see God in a way that the busy life of ministry does not permit.

With all the interest today in leading missionally and the emphasis on discerning God's voice for a church's missional direction, spending sabbatical time to stop and to listen takes on added significance. How can ministers hear God's voice for a congregation if they aren't hearing God's voice in their own lives? A good sabbatical makes room for us to reflect and listen.

Denise insists that knowing oneself is essential for planning a restful and renewing sabbatical, to go to the places where one experiences God's presence. Rod insists that ample space and time—not productivity—are also essential for fruitful reflection on God's hand in our lives and in our ministries.

—LYNNE M. BAAB is the author of numerous books, including Sabbath Keeping *and* Reaching Out in a Networked World. *She is a Presbyterian minister and teaches pastoral theology in New Zealand. Find more of her articles, as well as information about her books, at www.lynnebaab.com.*

Discuss:

1. What kind of sabbatical would be most refreshing for your spirit?
2. Do you think it's acceptable to use a sabbatical as a study period, or should sabbaticals always be used for rest and renewal?
3. Where would you like to go to experience God's presence?

Taking the First Steps

After reading the article above, follow these directions to start thinking about how you can apply these ideas.

Of the types of sabbaticals described in this article, which one is most appealing to you? Why?

If you were to take a similar sabbatical, how would you tailor it so that it would be most beneficial for you?

How to Get a Sabbatical

Prior to a sabbatical, a pastor must address three separate groups.

By Jay Beuoy

To get a sabbatical, I needed to change attitudes on three levels.

The Board
These people weren't for or against sabbaticals. They didn't have an opinion. No pastor before had ever asked for one, nor had they ever thought to offer.

Changing their attitudes was more a matter of educating than convincing. Aided by a pamphlet supplied by my district, I simply informed my board about the nature of sabbaticals.

The pamphlet outlined the unique nature of a pastor's workload (six-day workweeks, no free weekends, weeknights away from family, few free holidays, etc.) and possible effects—such as burnout and stress on the pastor's family.

The pamphlet also listed the benefits: a grateful pastor with a renewed vision, a more grateful pastor's wife, happier pastor's children, a pastor with enhanced training, and a deepened awareness of the love of the congregation for the pastor.

I didn't have to do any selling. I just let them read it and then asked if they would approve two months in the coming year. Aside from concern over details of pulpit supply, there were no objections. My request was passed unanimously.

Two lessons I learned: (1) Get reinforcement from an outside source (such as the pamphlet, or a similar document from your denomination), and (2) make sure you give enough advance notice.

The Congregation
If the elder board knew little about sabbaticals, the congregation knew even less. I learned the hard way that redundancy in communication is as important as back-up systems on an airliner.

After letting the congregation know about the dates of my sabbatical, I paid the matter little attention. That was a mistake. Several months before I was to leave, a congregation member came to an elders' meeting.

"I work two jobs to support my family," he said, "and no one gives me two months paid leave. Pastor Archetype never took a sabbatical. Why should Pastor Jay? I question his work ethic."

I'd have made it easier for myself if I'd communicated better to everyone.

My suggestion: distribute the same material to the congregation that you give to your board. Write about it in your church newsletter. Use informal opportunities to get the message across. Then accept the fact that you'll never have everyone's approval.

You

Boards and congregations can be won over. If they love their shepherd, they'll probably come to support the concept. The most difficult person to convince may be you.

When a fellow pastor heard about my sabbatical, he said, "Either you are really self-confident or just a fool to leave your congregation for two months." He saw the sabbatical as a risk that they might prefer me gone.

As a safeguard for the congregation and me, we built a provision into our sabbatical policy. I agreed not to use the time to look for another church, and they would not look for another pastor. We also agreed to a minimum of two years ministry after my return.

Another fear might be that the church will falter in your absence. We had just started a second service shortly before my original sabbatical dates. In order to insure some equilibrium, I postponed my trip for two months.

When I left it was with the conviction that God would take care of the church in my absence. He not only kept them well. The attendance figures were up when I returned. He proved to me that I'm not as important as I might think.

A sabbatical may seem too good to be true. As pastors, we're used to struggles and weariness. Yet, with a slight change of attitude on these three levels, you can get that needed rest. You, your family, and maybe even the church will appreciate it.

— *JAY BEUOY*

Discuss:

1. For you, is it more important to *convince* or to *educate* in order to get cleared for a sabbatical?
2. How would you respond to the man who spoke up at the elders' meeting?
3. Does your church have a policy that states the pastor must serve for at least a certain number of years following a sabbatical? If not, should it adopt such a policy?

Taking the First Steps

After reading the article above, follow these directions to start thinking about how you can apply these ideas.

The Board

The Congregation

You (and your family)

Sabbatical Is Not Study Leave

Why pastors should use sabbaticals to renew their spirit
By Eugene H. Peterson

The sabbatical is an entrenched tradition in academia. University professors, committed to the life of the mind, get them regularly every seventh year. And well they should. This life of the mind, teaching and thinking, is strenuous. The mind tires, grows stagnant, begins to repeat itself. The annual invasion of students, their curious and questioning minds strangely mingled with ignorance and sloth, constitutes a formidable challenge to a professor.

Academia exists to protect and develop knowledge, but knowledge is not a dead thing in a book. It's a living dialectic; it requires fully alive professors to maintain it. If knowledge disintegrates into cliché or soddens into data, intelligence is betrayed and the mind dulled. And so the schools provide for regular renewal of the professorial brain cells by providing sabbaticals.

But pastors, committed to the life of the spirit, a life at least as strenuous, if not more so, than the life of the mind, rarely get sabbaticals. I wonder why, for the spirit also tires, grows stagnant, begins to repeat itself. The weekly assembly of Christians, their hungry-and-thirsty-after-righteousness lives strangely mingled with sin and sloth, constitutes a formidable challenge to the pastor. The sanctuary exists to protect and develop holiness, but holiness is not a packaged attitude that can be sold to Sunday god-shoppers. It is life at risk before God, dangerously and awesomely at risk, and it needs fully alive pastors to represent it. If the life of faith is reduced to a church program or into jargon, the gospel is betrayed and the spirit dulled. Yet churches make little provision for renewal of spirit in those they set as overseers for the renewal of their spirits.

The omission impoverishes the church's spiritual vitality. Pastors enter their ordained work centered in prayer and alive to grace; after ten, twelve, thirteen years they find they simply don't have the energy for a life of prayer, of spirit. One after another and year after year, they abandon the terms of their ordination and settle for running churches.

A curious irony has occurred in the midst of this. Churches have, of late, been giving pastors study leave. In my denomination it is required—two weeks each year. But why "study"? That, surely, is not my central work. I stand before a congregation each week not as a lecturer in dogmatics but to lead them in prayer, bring them the sacraments, and guide them in listening to God. Intelligence, and the cultivation of intelligence by study, is not to be slighted in this work, but it is the life of spirit that is my forte. It is the prayer, contemplation, and proclamation to which I am guardian. The sanctuary, not the classroom, is my demesne.

I think I know what happened. Several centuries ago, the university took the practice of the sabbatical from the church and then altered it to suit its purposes. Recently, the

church glanced over at the university and noticed this wonderful practice and thought a sabbatical might be a good idea for pastors, too. And so we started taking it back. But instead of taking back what they took from us, a time for renewal of spirit, we are taking back what they turned it into—a renewal of mind. The all-but-universal practice is for pastors to go to universities and seminaries for these bastard sabbaticals and take academic courses. They return to their congregations with starched and in-fashion ideas, but their spirits as baggy as ever.

If we are going to take sabbaticals, let them be real sabbaticals: a willed passivity in order to be restored to alert receptivity to spirit-prayer, silence, solitude, worship. It is outrageous that we acquiesce to the world's definition of our word and let our unique, biblical sabbatical be put to the use of career advancement, psychological adjustment, and intellectual polish—with all the prayer and contemplation laundered out. The original intent of sabbath is a time to be silent and listen to God, not attend lectures; a time to be in solitude and be with God, not "interact" with fatigued peers. If help is to be given to the pastor in midcourse, it is not going to come by infusion of intellect but by renewal of spirit.

— *EUGENE H. PETERSON*

Discuss:

1. Prior to reading this, did you have a preconceived idea about how a pastor should spend sabbatical time?
2. Do you think a pastor's need for a sabbatical and can be compared to a professor's?
3. Do you think it's detrimental for pastors to focus on "study" during a sabbatical instead of focusing on spiritual renewal?

Taking the First Steps

Write your thoughts on each of the following statements.

Time for spiritual renewal is a major need for pastors.

Prayer times, reflection, and solitude are often casualties in the pastor's life.

After so many years, pastors often settle for just "running the church."

Sabbatical in the Office

How to get away when you can't go away

By Greg Asimakoupoulos

Emotional exhaustion, physical weariness, spiritual anorexia. Twelve years of task-oriented ministry had taken its toll. I was battling pastoral burnout, and I was losing. Ironically, the very week the Allied Forces were claiming victory in the Persian Gulf War, my own spirit was surrendering to battle fatigue.

As I prepared my messages for Holy Week, the cross of Good Friday became a symbol of my mental anguish. I was hanging lifelessly on the cross of depression, laboring to breathe under the suffocating weight of routine pastoral demands.

In a conversation with my superintendent, I confessed despair. He suggested a four-syllable remedy: sabbatical.

An extended time away from the never-ending responsibilities of the church (with full pay) was not a foreign concept to me. Two of my closest colleagues had been granted 12-week sabbaticals the previous summer. For both, the experience involved travel, rest, family reunions, and solitude. No degree was pursued. No article published. No manuscript written. Yet each returned home focused, fresh, and infused with a renewed desire to preach.

In the midst of my melancholy, the thought of "getting away from it all" had presented itself as a welcome hope even before the superintendent's call. His endorsement fanned my flickering fantasy into a burning desire.

I approached members of the congregation whose support was unquestioned. I confessed my frayed state. I expressed my hopes that the church leadership might endorse a sabbatical leave.

Their responses were less than encouraging: "A sabbati–what?" "For how long?" "You'd still collect a check?" "You're kidding, right?"

Although mentally I had begun packing my bags, their negative reactions stalled my sabbatical flight on the runway. The word *sabbatical* did not translate into the vocabulary of my congregation, who are largely blue-collar workers and middle-management lifers. Even the one person with whom I had attended college (whose father was a university professor) protested.

"I know all about sabbaticals for educators," Jeff boasted. "But I've never heard of it in the ministry. Besides, if you take off for three months, the church's finances will plummet."

Jeff's words characterized the feelings of those I approached. My superintendent's prescription for emotional survival was viewed as an unjustified vacation. I felt betrayed. I thought my church cared for me. Resentment stirred my already troubled spirit.

The pressures of pastoral time demands include the need to find time away from things pastoral. Just as we need a day off weekly, I believe we need extended periods off, at least two to three months every few years. But as I discovered, that isn't always possible. What then do we do?

Once my anger dissipated, I devised an itinerary for survival. Instead of taxiing down the runway towards a three-month getaway, I embarked on a day-to-day hike through the wilderness of weariness. I developed what turned out to be 12 keys to taking a sabbatical in the midst of work.

Pack Only the Essentials

For as long as necessary, I learned to say “No” more than I said “Yes.” A wilderness hike is a survival course. It demands living lean.

Christian management consultant Fred Smith learned first hand what it takes to survive: "I ought to be able to write down the two, three, or four major things I simply cannot slight, and I must be sure to work only on them. Everything else has to be pushed aside."

Realizing a sabbatical would not be forthcoming, I took the initiative and informed the pastoral relations committee what areas I would attend to for three months (and what areas I planned to neglect). They agreed. The essentials in my backpack included worship planning, preaching, writing, and emergency pastoral care.

Office mail I normally would have opened and dealt with, I stuck, unopened, in the boxes of board members. When a couple phoned late one day and asked if they could meet me that night to discuss their marriage problems, I made a judgment call: I decided their problem was not an emergency and said we could schedule an appointment (normally I would have forgone my planned family time and counseled them that night). It turned out that the problem was a temporary flare-up that passed, and we never needed to meet.

The weight of my pack proved just right.

Secure a Reliable Guide

I sensed I should avoid at all costs solitary climbing along the edges of burnout. Emotional exhaustion often disorients us. We need others to point us in the right direction. I took the advice I had given to scores of hurting people in my parish and sought out a reputable Christian therapist. His penetrating questions and tested observations provided weekly guidance as I trudged up the seemingly insurmountable mountains of ministry. I had the security that, no matter how lost I felt, he would help me stay on the trail.

I had to struggle against false guilt during this time of healing. For instance, though I feel called to write and find it fulfilling and therapeutic, I felt guilty about taking time

away from church-related ministry. My "guide" assured me that writing was part of my calling, part of what my church supported me to do in its outreach to the larger world. Talking this through gave me a new sense of assurance and peace.

Guides come in all shapes and sizes. Not only did a therapist help me, but so did my wife, a colleague across town, and even my church chairman. The only prerequisite for trustworthy guides: they need to provide unconditional acceptance that allows you to climb out of your pit at your own pace.

Take Binoculars

I found it essential to take my eyes off my desk to daydream or drink in the beauty of God's creation at least once a day. It's so easy to fix my focus on the trail and forget the songbirds overhead that originally called me to ministry.

For six weeks I limited the length of my daily to-do list. Not everyone in the hospital got visited. Letters remained unwritten. Some phone calls weren't returned. And I recycled a newsletter devotional from two years previous instead of writing a new one. As a result I recaptured enough time to reflect on and rejoice in what I had accomplished. The field glasses of discretionary time allowed me to see the world that existed apart from next week's sermon.

Pitch Your Tent Nightly

I gave myself permission to sleep in each morning for a week or two. Adrenaline can camouflage how tired we really are. I figured that if I felt the need for a sabbatical, I most likely needed to catch up on my sleep.

Psychologist Archibald Hart of Fuller Seminary suggests a way to determine how much sleep your body demands: if you hide your alarm clock in your night stand for a week, your body will wake up on its own without artificial stimulation.

When I followed his advice, I discovered how weary I was. Much of my depression was actually my body's muffled cry for rest.

At first I felt guilty for sleeping in and watching the *Today Show* while sipping coffee (or catching a few warm rays of sunshine as I read the paper on the deck). But after two weeks of not meeting anybody for early morning meetings or worrying about what time I clocked in at the office, I got rid of both my guilt and the accumulating luggage under my eyelids.

Grab Your Walking Stick

That's another way of saying, establish a realistic exercise routine.

My therapist suggested that my life was in need of balance. For me that meant incorporating an aerobic workout into my daily regimen. I'm not an athlete by lifestyle, and my body gave ready witness to the flabby truth. I began to walk briskly for an hour a day. (I could afford an hour because of my scaled-down demands.)

Ironically, that hour away from my desk was most productive. It gave me time to pray, which I hadn't been doing much of in my depressed state. Walking also gave me

time to reacquaint myself with the satisfaction of muscle fatigue, to be alone with my thoughts, and to catch up on the news—I'd often wear my Walkman. After two months of power walking, I began jogging (I'm up to four miles a day and actually enjoy it).

I've discovered there is something refreshing about achieving personal goals, like exercise, that don't have to pass by the board first. Of all the steps I've taken to survive without a sabbatical, regular exercise was the most immediate salvation. At the end of the first week, I was sleeping better and awaking rested. After the second month, my head cleared considerably, and I felt more optimistic.

Remember Your Whittling Knife

Making it through ministry requires making time for me, and that includes digging out my "whittling knife."

Some of my friends have dusted off their golf clubs or softball mitts. Others have dug out that old fishing pole or invested in a new tennis racquet. I chose to pursue a latent interest in photography, which soon became a meaningful way to express my often captive emotions.

With the pressures of people's problems, pessimistic pew sitters, and sermon preparation, factoring joy into my routine has worked well.

Call it a hobby. Call it a divine diversion. Call it whatever. I just call it fun and call it often. And I don't give up because of a busy signal. There will always be a legitimate excuse for not relaxing and having fun. But such excuses are no excuse. Recreation is a means of being re-created from within. Besides, who ever heard of a hiker who didn't pack a knife, harmonica, or camera?

Carry Along a Hiker's Log

I journaled my journey. When emotions and thoughts held me hostage, I learned anew that a pen and notebook offered a way of escape. Getting my feelings onto paper relaxed their strangulating grip and let me look at the invisible. I've heard it said, "Thoughts untangle and make more sense when they pass through articulating finger tips."

In addition, as I looked back on previous documented difficulties, I better discerned my tendencies and God's faithfulness. My journal from seminary days reminded me that discouragement and drivenness have shared my berth before. As I reread my restless seminary journal, I found reason to believe God would rescue me once again.

I didn't follow a schedule or place demands on myself to journal. When needed, I used it as an emotional catharsis, not a diary, and usually for only about 15 minutes at a time.

Look Out for the Lookouts

Howard Thurman from Harvard Divinity School first introduced me to the concept of "minute vacations" in his book *The Inward Journey*. There's something to be said for a wee pause for our network of nerves to identify themselves and relax—reclining in a chair, feet on the desk, eyes closed, meditation. Three or four times a day, such an inner panorama helps recalibrate my perspective.

But minute vacations can be enlarged to include an afternoon of antiquing with your wife, a day at an art museum with your son, going away on a solitary retreat for a night or two to read and pray, or religiously taking a mini vacation from work once a week—some call it a day off.

Listen to the Waterfalls

Emotional exhaustion is often accompanied by apathy and dulled feelings; life loses its song. If music could make a difference for someone as tormented as King Saul, how much more for a pastor.

I incorporated my car stereo and boom box into my daily grind, turning on the music that fueled my feelings. I discovered my Walkman to be more than a source of news. It was my emotional jumper cable. Praise music and classical masterpieces, even the big-band sounds of the 1940s, lifted my spirits. I cranked up the volume and luxuriated in melodies that ministered to my shriveled heart. The sounds of these alpine waterfalls helped keep this hiker on the hoof.

Pull the Snapshots Out of Your Pack

I regularly update the photos on my desk. Those framed faces remind me whom I'm providing for, and that my provision is more than just bringing home the bacon; my wife and kids want the whole hog to hug and spend time with.

An occasional glimpse at those we love helps us focus on what ultimately matters (and it's not Mrs. Jones's hernia). Remembering my identity as a husband and father keeps me from being too compulsive about my role as pastor.

One night, when we were sitting around the dining room table, out of nowhere my seven-year-old daughter said, "I'm so happy when we're together as a family." That's positive reinforcement!

Collect Firewood

In other words, I build altars of praise. I practiced the discipline of personal worship even when the desire to do so was absent. If ever an awareness of God is needed, it is in the blindness of burnout. On the mountain trail in the withering midday heat, the need for firewood is not as obvious as it will be come nightfall. It means doing what we don't feel like doing at the time.

When I annually explain the process of confirmation to our sixth-grade parents, I suggest that in confirmation we are laying the logs of truth in the fireplace of Christian community, so that when the Holy Spirit ignites a flame of faith, there is something to sustain a fire. That is similar to what I experienced in my private times before the Lord. Upon the cold hearth of my cold heart, I placed the logs found in poetry, music, silence, and scripture.

At first I was tempted to go through the motions of a routine quiet time. But my ability to fake it soon faded. I resisted benign devotions in favor of honest communication with God. No regimented Bible study, no protracted periods of prayer—at times just thoughtful sighs and audible groans in an empty sanctuary were the only

twigs I could find. But God was there. He also found me in King David's diary of depression, the Psalms. He even spoke to me through a couple of those radio Bible teachers our congregations compare us to. Through simple and sincere expressions of friendship with the Father, I collected a pile of logs for when the flame of passion would return.

As of now, those spiritual flames are still in the process of returning. It's been a slow recovery, with emotional restoration coming far more easily than spiritual. Still, I feel more loved and accepted by God than at any time in my ministry.

Keep in Contact with the Lodge

When paraplegic Mark Wellman climbed Half Dome in Yosemite National Park last fall, he maintained regular contact with the park lodge. His supporters waited at the valley floor with bated interest because of the precarious challenge facing their friend. Mark complied with their need to know how he was doing and used his walkie-talkie often.

I chose to share with my board my ups and downs. I disclosed my own need for pastoral care from a therapist. I distributed articles on the phenomena of pastoral burnout and ministerial stress. I also shared some of my struggles with the church, though not enough to undermine my credibility.

A few critics have pointed to my non-sabbatical sabbatical as evidence of my shortcomings. Our church had been going through a conflict of sorts before and after this period. My candid approach of dealing with my needs lost me a few more credibility points with them.

But for the vast majority in our church, I gained credibility. Many people have repeatedly thanked me for handling the situation as I did, and they have been more open about their own struggles as a result. If I were to do it all over again, I wouldn't change a thing.

— *GREG ASIMAKOUPOULOS*

Discuss:

1. If a sabbatical isn't possible for you (yet), what are some ways you might be able to take a "sabbatical in the office"?
2. Of all the items listed on this Asimakoupoulos' "itinerary for survival," which is the most daunting or the toughest for you?
3. Which would be best for you (and your congregation): a sabbatical or a sabbatical in the office?

Taking the First Steps

Respond to the following statements.

Taking a sabbatical would be best for me.

Taking a sabbatical would be best for my congregation.

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Back from Sabbatical

The gifts of a sabbatical

By Nancy Beach

Recently I returned to an official ministry role following a sabbatical. After more than 20 years in leadership, I needed time away to be a quiet, private Christian for a while. Beyond rest and rich family time, I received other valuable gifts, each wrapped in a question.

Who am I?

For six months I did not teach, lead, or create anything connected to Sunday services. I wrestled at a deep level with my faith, seeking to disentangle what is most real and basic and true about my relationship with a holy God from the sticky web of professional ministry expectations.

I revisited the simple reasons I love my Lord so much, and the reasons that motivated my early decision to serve God and the church. I saw myself again as a precious daughter of God, and basked in the wonder of what grace means for me.

Assisted by a skilled Christian counselor, I also worked through some wounds of ministry disappointments and explored unhealthy patterns, both in my leadership style and in key relationships. Although my agenda going into the sabbatical was to discover my next ministry assignment, God had a distinctly different agenda. His priority was not so much where I would be serving, but who I am becoming.

What can I learn?

The second gift was the profound privilege of being catapulted into new arenas where I could breathe different air and be stretched and challenged. I read without thinking about how I would use the material in a service.

I seized the rare opportunity to visit other churches on Sunday mornings, Episcopal to Pentecostal, small to large. I was reminded of the incredible breadth and diversity of God's kingdom. God is at work in so many different places and in so many different ways!

I also had the privilege of enjoying a little travel, most memorably to Italy where I saw art and beauty that lifted my spirits, rooted my soul, and captured my imagination.

As a result, I return to ministry with far more to give to our congregation.

Where am I headed?

Toward the end of my sabbatical, the Spirit finally gave me freedom to ask the questions that so urgently pressed on my mind. I held everything loosely, as loosely as I could, and gave God room to guide me in any direction, even if it meant a change in location or shifting into a volunteer role. In the end, I had peace about returning to my church in a different position, nothing too dramatic, but definitely a change.

I don't know how I could have wrestled with all these questions had I been caught up in the intense pace of ministry life. Solitude led me to peace. I learned what it really means to *wait on the Lord*.

I am now a passionate advocate for Christian leaders to plan ahead for a sabbatical time. These breaks can range from a month to a year, but they won't just happen on their own.

We must intentionally carve out a window of time, and then courageously make the request. Remember that some kind of resting period is truly biblical—an extended Sabbath, a year of no harvest, time to slip away to the desert.

Give yourself and the Lord room to work in less structure, weaving your days with opportunities for surprises, unexpected connections, and learning. A sabbatical is not about completing a book or rehabbing your house. Let yourself breathe.

I've been back a month and I'm still basking in the glow of my sabbatical gifts. It's good to be back.

— NANCY BEACH

Discuss:

1. How would I answer the question, “Who am I?”
2. How would I answer the question, “What can I learn?”
3. How would I answer the question, “Where am I headed?”

Further Resources

Books and resources on taking sabbaticals

BuildingChurchLeaders.com: Leadership training resources from Christianity Today International.

-"Spiritual Disciplines" Assessment Pack

-"Spiritual Growth" Assessment Pack

-"Spiritual Refreshment" Women Leaders

-"How to Spend a Day Alone" Article

-"Am I Too Tired?" Interactive Assessment

LeadershipJournal.net: Practical advice and articles for church leaders from our sister magazine.

Clergy Renewal: The Alban Guide to Sabbatical Planning *by A. Richard Bullock and Richard J. Bruesehoff*. This book aims to address every aspect of sabbaticals: planning, taking leave, being on sabbatical, and re-entering the place of work. (Alban Institute, 2000; ISBN 978-1566992237)

The Contemplative Pastor *by Eugene H. Peterson*. This book discusses sabbaticals as well as other elements of a pastor's life and ministry, offering encouragement and refreshment for weary. (Eerdmans, 1993; ISBN 978-0802801142)

Journeying Toward Renewal: A Spiritual Companion for Pastoral Sabbaticals *by Melissa Bane Sevier*. A resource to help pastors make the most of their sabbatical. (Alban Institute, 2002; ISBN 978-1566992732)

Sabbatical Journey *by Henri Nouwen*. Nouwen kept this journal during his sabbatical—taken during what would be his last year of life—and in this inspiring account, he focuses foremost on friendship and prayer. (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000; ISBN 978-0824518783)