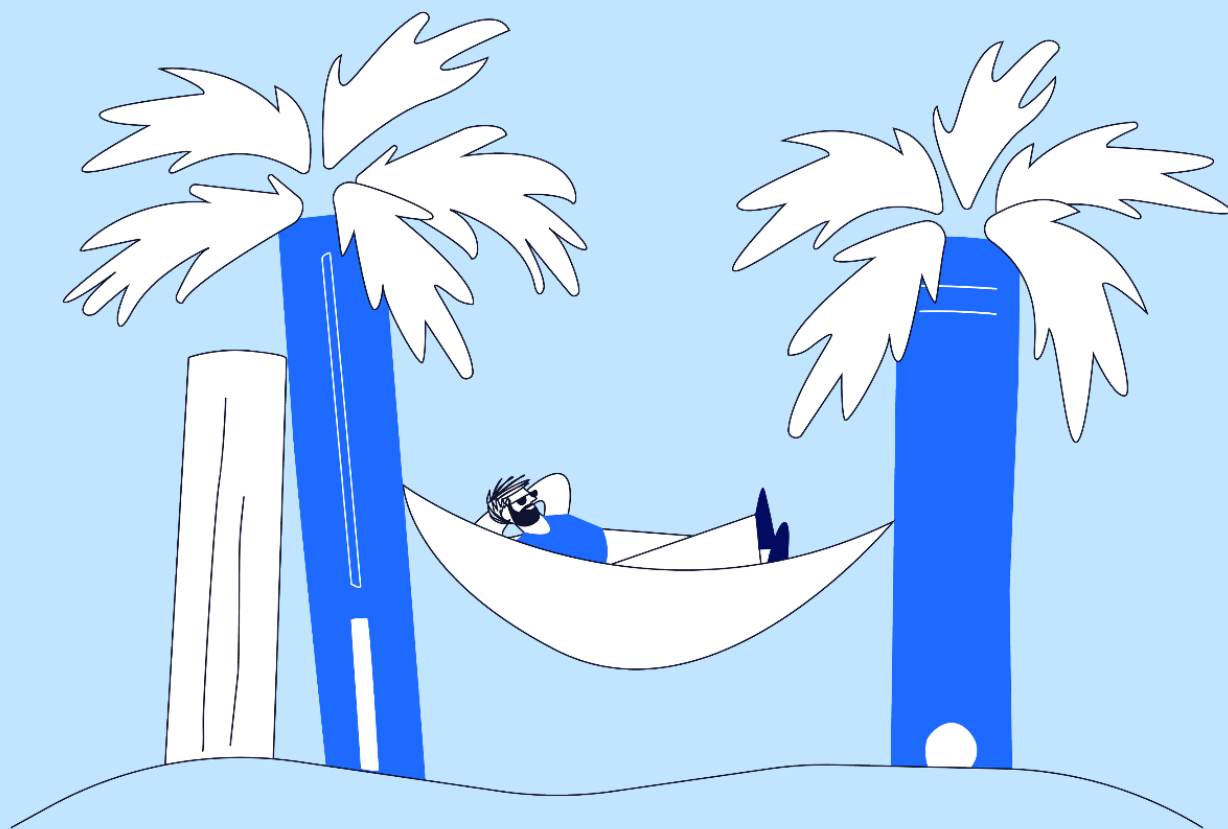


A Pastor's Sabbatical Guide

Pausing with Purpose

Mark Brians



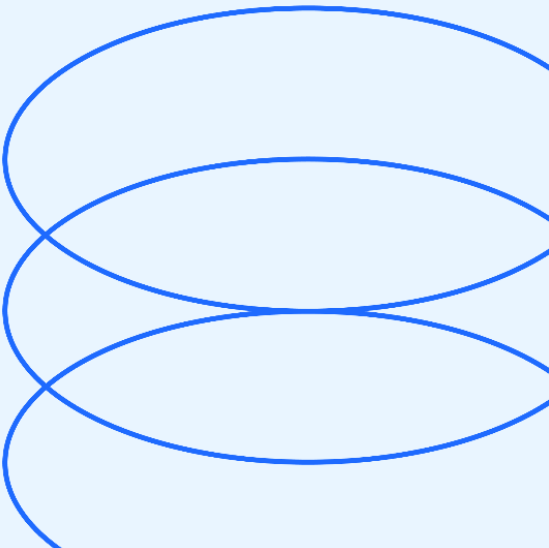
About the Author

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Introduction

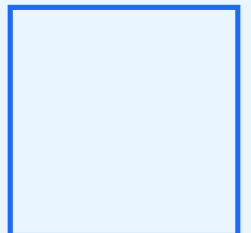


There is a growing consensus in the church today of the wisdom in securing a sabbatical rest for those who are laboring in full-time ministry. The general nature of what it means to take a ministry sabbatical is simple: a cessation of ministry practice for the space of several months. Simple, right? But for all its simplicity, the idea of a ministry sabbatical brings numerous questions in its wake. For example:

- How long should the sabbatical be?
- What things should and should not be done during a sabbatical?
- How is a sabbatical different from a vacation?
- How much writing and study should be involved in the sabbatical plan?
- What are the expectations and commitments of the church about what happens when the pastor is on sabbatical?
- What about when the pastor returns?
- How is a sabbatical different from professional development?

The questions—and the theological and logistical problems they pose for both the pastor and the church—can seem enough to bring into doubt whether taking a sabbatical is actually worth it. Getting some basic biblical clarity around the goal of a pastoral sabbatical, however, allows us to conceive of it in very doable terms. It is not so much that a biblical theology grants us a license to bypass the problems posed, but it does give us an internal logic by which various churches in differing contexts laboring under diverse constraints can respond to problems as they emerge. What follows, therefore, is less of an answer key as it is a rubric.

What Is the Purpose of a Pastoral Sabbatical?



On the seventh day, God rested from all his labors and sanctified a day of rest for his people (Gen 2:2–3; Exod 20:7). All human rest, all human Sabbath-making, must begin here: in who God is. This first Sabbath was instituted before the fall, before sin and decay as we know them have entered the story. God himself *rests*, he “Sabbath,” which is to say he “ceases.” The word from which we get Sabbath means something close to “stop” or “desist.”

God, who neither slumbers nor sleeps (Ps 121:4), does indeed *rest*. This rest of his is not the result of exhaustion, nor is its goal something like practicing self-care. It is instead his taking delight in what he has made: a kind of divine repose whose origin and end is his own triune communion.

It is this divine interpersonal blessedness, this enjoyment and repose, into which humanity is invited to be partakers. Adam was made the day before the Sabbath in the Genesis account, not as an accident but as an invitation.

God’s people in the Mosaic law were called to keep the Sabbath, not as a mere calendrical feature nor as a kind of weekly day off (Levites, for instance, worked very hard on the Sabbath), but as a weekly festival of repose in God’s goodness.

Not gathering food and not kindling new fires were the two primary features of Levitical Sabbaths (cf. Exod 16:22–28; Num 15:32–36). The food they ate on the Sabbath was festal food by which God’s people proclaimed that God would provide, and the only fire that burned that day was the great hearth fire of the altar in God’s tabernacle. This is why, for instance, a person could help an animal who had fallen in a pit without violating the Sabbath (Luke 14:5) or, in the case of Jesus, could heal the sick (e.g., Mark 3:1–6), whereas gathering food to eat or sticks for a new fire were deemed serious offenses.

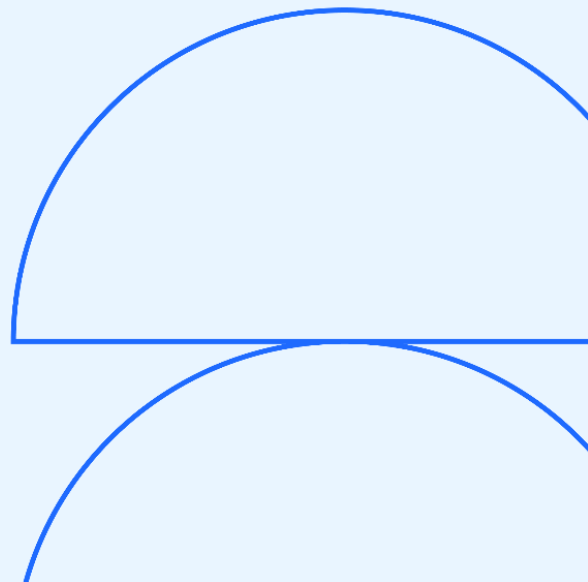
Within this system, one thing in particular enjoyed an additional seven-year gift of “stopping”: fields, and by association, certain kinds of livestock (Exod 23:10–11; Lev 25:1–7). The goal was for all to enjoy the fruit of the land without laboring to increase its productivity. Specifically, there were those in Israel who particularly needed that fallow Sabbatical season to find recreation and refreshment (e.g., wild animals, the poor, the sojourner, the land and plants themselves). Again, the message was clear: stop, rest, be at peace, God will provide.

The pastoral sabbatical, as it has developed in the church, imitates the internal logic of the weekly Sabbath by treating pastors like cattle and fields: things that need a season of lying fallow, a season of allowing good things to run wild. While this kind of biblical application may strike us as strange, it follows the example set by Paul in reading ministry principles from Levitical agricultural regulations (e.g., 1 Tim 5:18; cf. Deut 25:4).

The goal, then, of the pastoral sabbatical is twofold:

1. To lead the local congregation in a sustained period of proclaiming that God is the one who is in control, the provider and sustainer (as opposed to the pastor)
2. To allow the pastor, like the fields of Israel, a season of lying fallow in order to take care of the things that most need the fruit of his life to remain unharvested for their use—like his marriage, his family, and his own spiritual life

What a Sabbath Is *Not*

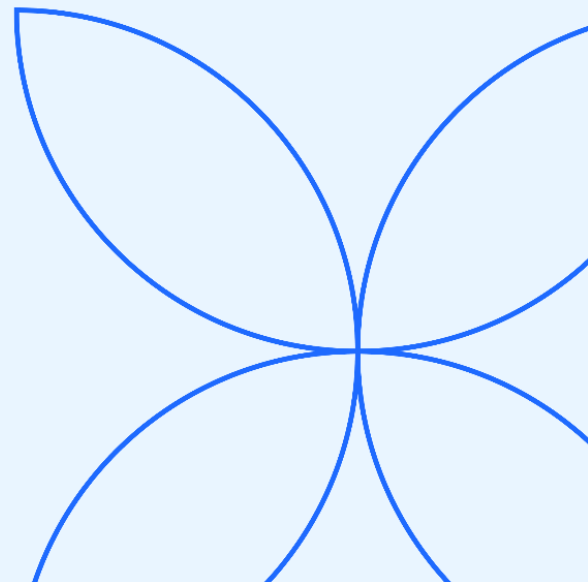


A pastoral sabbatical is not a time to increase productivity. It is not the time to write books, complete a bunch of continuing education modules, or do long-term strategic planning. There are other kinds of time that can be allocated to such things—but not the sabbatical.

A sabbatical is also not a time for disciplinary action. It must not be used as a remedy for problems in the local church. Again, there are other forms of time away for that purpose.

A sabbatical is also not (primarily) a protracted vacation. Though enjoyment is key to Sabbath rest, it is often the case—especially in our spectacle-oriented culture—that cramming a bunch of fun activities into every moment of our sabbatical, or treating it like a long holiday away, will not allow the pastor or his family to enter deeply into the kind of rest and renewal that will lead to flourishing in ministry upon their return. Just as there is a substantial difference between enjoying an ice cream cone and bingeing a gallon of rocky road, so there is a difference between enjoying some vacation-y things on sabbatical and bingeing on a multi-month vacation.

How Often Should Pastors Take a Sabbatical & How Long Should a Sabbatical Last?



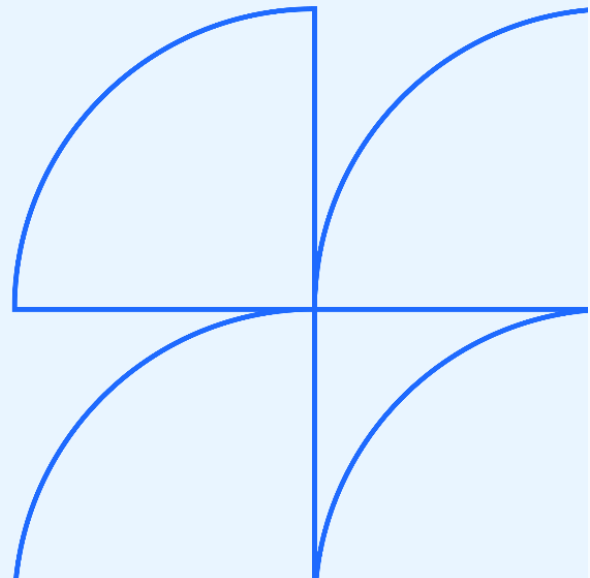
Ideally, a sabbatical occurs on a seven-year cycle, though there may be circumstances when it is prudent to take it earlier or later.

A sabbatical is typically three to five months long, though this length can vary according to various contexts. The main thing to keep in mind is that the sabbatical should contain enough time on either side. This allows margin for transition. Give yourself two to three weeks to decompress from ministry life, and another two to three weeks at the end to rally again.

On rare occasions, it might be wise to extend the sabbatical. Usually, an extension is granted either in response to unusual circumstances in the life of the pastor (e.g., being on sabbatical surfaced some urgent areas for care or growth before re-entry) or an interruption to the sabbatical (e.g., the death of a close friend or family member). If the rule is that a pastor should only be interrupted on a sabbatical for emergencies, some policy should be in place for what to do should they arise.

It is critical that things like extensions or interruptions be carefully thought through and prayed over by the pastor, the pastor's family, and the leadership prior to the sabbatical. This will ensure everyone has clarity regarding what actions and communications should be taken if one of these should happen.

What Kinds of Things Should a Pastor Do on Sabbath?



The pastor should carefully and prayerfully discern the kinds of things that would refresh him in body, mind, and soul, and would equip him for even greater fruitfulness in ministry upon his return. This discernment should take place with key leaders both within and outside of his local ministry context. And with his wife, if he is married.

It is important to make a distinction between things which, on the one hand, are restful, and those things which, on the other, bring us more deeply into the rest of the Lord. One can, in theory, spend an entire sabbatical doing a bunch of restful things (e.g., hiking, massages, spa treatments, golfing, visiting national monuments, cruising the Amalfi coast, etc.) and never enter into a closer union with the God who is himself rest. Do restful things, sure. But make sure that those restful things are ordered toward the kinds of spiritual practices that will deepen your rest in God's love.

Increased time in prayer and spiritual reflection must be at the top of your priorities and should be first on the sabbatical schedule. This may look like a daily rhythm of longer-than-usual devotional times, or it may take the form of more formal but infrequent spiritual retreats for substantial stretches of time, even days.

Increased time in the Word of God must be met with prayer. Every pastor wishes they had more time to luxuriate in Scripture—the power of God's Word is why many of us became pastors in the first place. The sabbatical must be understood as precisely a time to do that.

There is also wisdom in using some of the time for study. Not all study is aimed at productive achievements. Not all study is labor. The kind of study best suited for sabbatical rest is not the kind that will belong on the same to-do list when the pastor returns from sabbatical (e.g., “Oh, this will make a great men's group study ...”). No, it is the kind of study that is going to pique the pastor's interest, delight the mind, and expand the imagination.

One study plan that needs to be in place before the start of a sabbatical is the pastor's plan for spending increased time in prayer and in the Scriptures. It is easy to think that with a decrease in pastoral duties there will naturally be a corresponding increase in personal devotion and Bible study. But the law of thermodynamics does not apply here: There is no necessary reaction to the action of going on break. As every pastor knows from our many days, years, and decades of doing discipleship, nobody drifts downstream into an increase in prayer and Bible study. We must lay pattern-forming, habit-shaping, soul-renewing plans that will structure our rest time around key schedules of reading the Bible.

This is not a chore! For most pastors, it was precisely this desire to devote ourselves to the lifelong study of Scripture that helped fuel the call to ministry in the first place. “This,” thought many of us before our entry into full-time ministry, “this glorious, life-changing book-of-all-books, this Word of the Lord, this gospel of Jesus—oh, to give my life to it!” Throughout the course of ministry, however, that desire can grow cold, utilitarian, or

over-familiar. It becomes very easy to fall into a kind of lackadaisical posture toward God's Word when we're preaching it week in and week out. "Easter again? Okay, let's see ..." can come to define a pastor's attitude. The Bible becomes a kind of raw material from which we do the work of "making it say something." No!

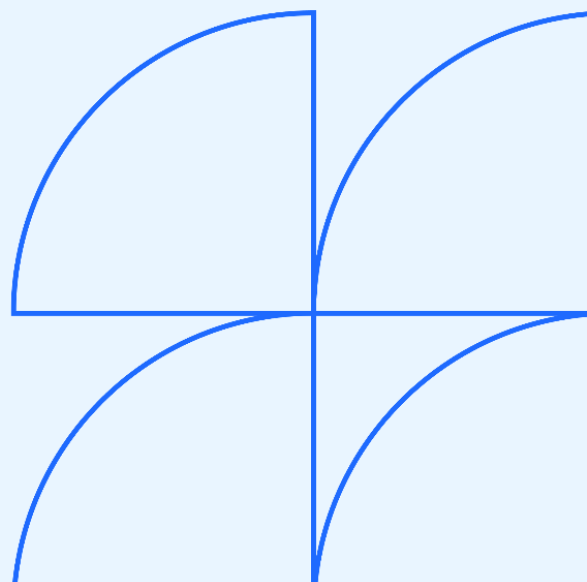
We know this is not true, but in the day-to-day trenches of ministry, it is particularly challenging for a pastor to lose the raw and pulsing excitement of the Bible. Sabbatical time is Bible time. Like an anniversary getaway for a married couple, the pastoral sabbatical needs to be aimed—almost romantically—at stoking the pastor's zeal for God's Word.

Finally, the care of the soul and body and the life of his family are critical things to attend to on the sabbatical. What would deepen the pastor? What would increase the unity of the family? What would be beneficial to the marriage? But be careful! The standard answer on offer in much of contemporary church culture is "do this" or "do that." Often doing stuff is exactly what the pastor's life and the life of a pastor's family is filled with Monday through Sunday, and, therefore, exactly what they need a break from!

Apart from responding to critical needs (e.g., marital or individual clinical counseling, if necessary), there should be plans before the sabbatical begins for intentional "nothings," for stretches of lingering and blissful repose. Long walks, hikes ended early because picnicking took too long, uncounted hours on a towel in the grass reading a book by the lake, days of playing with the kids in the water at the beach, weeks of lengthy dinners uninterrupted by meetings or pastoral phone calls, fistfuls of "Oh my goodness, it's midnight! How long have we been looking at the stars?"—this is the stuff of Sabbath.

The best answer a pastor can give to the question "What did you do on sabbatical?" should be something very close to: "Blessedly nothing." The degree from which the pastor's sabbatical veers from "nothing much" and "God is so good" is the degree to which church leaders should be concerned.

What Kinds of Things Should a Pastor *Not* Do on a Sabbatical?



In the interest of ensuring that the pastor can enter into the full richness of a sabbatical, it is important not only to emphasize the things that ought to be done but also to be clear about those things which ought not to be done. There are some things that are going to run against the grain of Sabbath time.

1. Sabbatical is not a break from the norms of Christian life

A pastor should not suspend those practices and rhythms which mark the normal and healthy life of a disciple of Jesus. A pastor should not withdraw from the social life of a local church. It is very wise—and almost always necessary—for pastors on sabbatical to cease attending the church where they minister. But that in no way means the months of the sabbatical should be spent away from church altogether.

It is important that the pastor and the leadership team find ways for the pastor to fellowship and worship with a body of believers during the full length of the sabbatical. This often means finding a suitable if temporary home in a different local body in whatever area (or areas) the pastor will occupy during the sabbatical.

2. A pastor should refrain from avoiding the silence that will mark at least moments of the sabbatical

A pastor's life is marked by certain sounds: text messages, phone calls, people arriving at the house for dinner, being brought into conversation, working with the music team, etc. A sabbatical for the most part will suspend the majority of these sounds, and the temptation will be to fill the void with other kinds of noise. We all know the feeling of driving alone in a car with nothing playing. We all have the itch to fill silence with something, anything!

The common reflex to silences such as these is to pull out our phones and play music in our earbuds, check emails, watch YouTube videos, scroll through social media feeds, play mindless games, and so on. We tend to identify the cessation of the daily traffic of noise as a problem to be fixed, not an invitation to be accepted.

Sabbath time should be marked by a general willingness to stand in those silences and be silent—especially if the pastor has a family. These silences offer unique moments of un-stylized encounter. Practice simply sitting or standing in the silences and waiting and being present in the body. The world will draw you back into its sounds later. Sabbatical time ought not to be spent hastening away the silences which befall us.

3. As already mentioned, a sabbatical is a different species of time off altogether

It is not an extended vacation, as I said before. Therefore, while some measure of spectacular activities (e.g., theme parks, resort stays, tons of movies, tons of junk food, sightseeing, skydiving, etc.) are perfectly fine to add into a sabbatical, a pastor should not spend the time of rest inundated by them. Ours is an era in which almost all notions of rest, apart from actual sleep, is defined by the accumulation of fun experiences instead of by their cessation. Back-to-back bookings of fun things to do is not going to leave the space needed for true spiritual renewal. It merely exchanges one kind of laborious endeavor (ministry) for another (doing all the fun things).

4. A pastor should not spend his sabbatical brooding over the pains, difficulties, or struggles of ministry life

Working through and processing with the Lord and with wisely selected counsel—for both the pastor and, where appropriate, the pastor's family—is good. In measure, it is a proper use of sabbatical time. But it is another thing altogether to allow the pains and difficulties to preoccupy you. Problem-solving on sabbatical is usually a fruitless endeavor. It can even lead to resentment of people and of ministry work itself.

Most of those struggles which were there when you went on sabbatical will still be there when you return. Some will have gone away of their own accord. Almost all of these things are beyond your control to alter while on sabbatical.

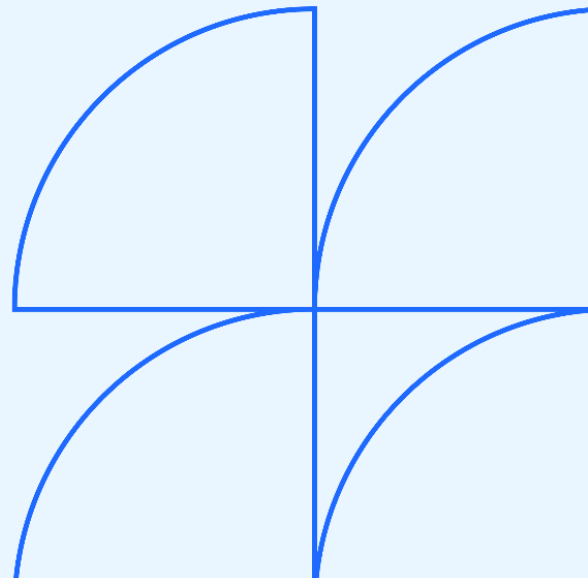
Therefore, apart from working on his own heart before the Lord, it is wisest for a pastor to let as much of the struggle and worry and pain he leaves behind, stay behind. Just as Israel trusted the Lord to provide when they let the field lay fallow, and just as the pastor's church is trusting the Lord to provide while their pastor's away, so also the pastor must trust the Lord with those things that plague his mind.

5. A pastor should not allow things such as email or social media to haunt the sabbatical

Understanding that there are some features of these technologies that the pastor must use for ease of life, the goal should be to restrict these aspects of modern life as much as possible. These kinds of media have an unrivaled capacity to pull the pastor back into the non-sabbatical world (e.g., you didn't mean to open your email but you read the subject line and now you're stressed; that Facebook post your parishioner made that you feel you ought to address; etc.). Even if never clicked or responded to, they have violated the sacred boundary of the sabbatical and now exercise a kind of free tenancy in your thoughts and hopes. Once

again, good plans can be laid by the pastor and the church's leadership team ahead of time to attend to this.

How Should a Pastor & His Church Prepare for a Sabbatical?



Three plans should be laid out as clearly as possible in the planning that goes into a sabbatical:

1. A plan for how the church is going to send out the pastor

What date the pastor will leave, what duties will cease when, the way in which the church will send their pastor out, and how the related costs will be covered (i.e., interim pastoral care, pulpit supply, sabbatical costs, etc.)

2. A plan for the sabbatical itself

This plan has two parts:

1. What the pastor will be doing (and *not* doing)
2. What the church will be doing (and, also, *not* doing)

This plan often will require severe accountability for the pastor to ensure that everyone is united to make sure not to let ministry labor slip into sabbatical (e.g., “No, you can’t go and preach three times at your friend’s church during this season”). It is also good when setting this plan to clearly define what things count as legitimate interruptions from sabbatical (e.g., the death of a key member of the congregation) and what things do not (e.g., the music leader quit). The general principle here should run as follows: Interrupt the pastor for the kinds of things that (unless we interrupt him now) will make his re-entry more difficult.

3. A plan for re-entry

The pastor and the church need to be clear early on in the sabbatical planning process about how they want to welcome the pastor back into active ministry. Does one enter back into all of the duties of the office immediately, or is there a transition season? What will the first Sunday after the return from sabbatical look like? What about the fifth Sunday after the return? Many of these questions will vary from place to place and between differing ecclesiologies. The goal, though, is to have the needed conversations ahead of time and to make the re-entry plan.

Sabbatical Checklist

A good sabbatical checklist will look similar to the one below. However, each church situation will have different needs or values. Thought should be given for how each local congregation and each pastor ought to tailor the following checklist for each particular sabbatical.

- ☐ Between the pastor and the leadership, discern and agree about the timing of a sabbatical.
- ☐ Prayerfully discern the needs and scope of the sabbatical. Include key members of the local church, the pastor, the pastor's family, and maybe outside counsel.
- ☐ Establish a clear transition plan for how the pastor and the church leadership will communicate with the congregation and guide them in the months and weeks leading up to the sabbatical.
- ☐ Establish a clear funding plan for how the sabbatical costs will be covered.
- ☐ Establish a clear plan for what shape the sabbatical will take, taking into account:
 - ☐ Length of sabbatical
 - ☐ Pulpit supply and pastor care for parish/assembly during sabbatical
 - ☐ Long-range plan for pastor's sabbatical (i.e., the what, when, where, how of the sabbatical).
 - ☐ Daily rhythms and accountabilities for sabbatical agreed upon
 - ☐ Boundaries for sabbatical agreed upon
- ☐ Establish a clear plan for how to respond if:
 - ☐ The sabbatical gets interrupted by unforeseen and exceptional circumstances
 - ☐ The sabbatical needs to be lengthened
- ☐ Establish a clear plan for how the pastor and the church plan to transition after the sabbatical is concluded.
- ☐ Establish a clear understanding about the church's and the pastor's mutual commitments regarding what the future after the sabbatical looks like (e.g., how long does the pastor need, in good faith, to plan to stay at congregation for?).

Conclusion

In all of this, it is important to remember that a sabbatical is not (if we're going to be precise in our theological grammar) taken by a pastor. It is given by God. And he gives it to *both* the local congregation *and* to the pastor for their good and their long-term flourishing in the gospel. Just as the promise behind the Sabbatical laws was that the people might enter into the delights of their Creator, so also a pastoral sabbatical is intended to lengthen and deepen the life of the church's ministry in a given locality.

A sabbatical is a grand witness to the goodness of God who invites us into enjoying the fruits of the kingdom. It helps remind us that the goal of ministry, whether the ministry of the pastor or the ministry of the people, is not pharaonic. It's not baking bricks in Egypt, so to speak. The goal of kingdom ministry is the glory of God and the enjoyment of him forever.

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