

7 Sabbatical Insights for Pastors

The church I served as executive pastor for eight years (Christ Fellowship) graciously gives their pastors a sabbatical. Mine was scheduled for six weeks in the summer of 2010, but I was not quite sure I was going to make it until then.

In January of 2010, some signs of exhaustion were clear. I was struggling to sleep at night, always thinking about some issue or opportunity as I tossed in bed. I felt impatient and numb. I would completely crash on the couch on Sunday afternoons, barely move until Monday morning, and wake up still very tired. I was transparent with Kaye, my wife, and told her I thought I could make it until June--the start of the sabbatical. But in April, I hit a wall. I was in a simple meeting with our business administrator looking at a budget report, not something that usually stumped me. But I could not make sense of it. I was gone, toast. There was nothing left.

I called Kaye, and she quickly called a family in the church who let me stay at their house in the Florida Keys for a few days. Kaye came down at nights to have dinner. I slept, read, ate, and slept again each day for two days. God used those few days to get me through to the sabbatical and to show me how much I needed the time that the church was going to graciously give me in just a few weeks.

The sabbatical was incredible. Kaye and I planned it with great intentionality. And the Lord used it deeply in my life. I read entire books of the Bible in one sitting and felt overwhelmed with the grace of God. I played for hours with our girls, took Kaye on tons of dates, never once answered my phone, and exercised almost every day. When I came back to my ministry role, I was refreshed spiritually, physically, and mentally.

Here are seven lessons learned from my sabbatical:

1) Leave your cell phone behind. I bought a cheap disposable cell phone with pre-paid minutes on it. Only two people had the number, my assistant and my pastor. They both knew only to call in extreme emergencies. We defined what those would be beforehand, and only a few rare things made the list. The phone did not ring one time. It took me almost two weeks to stop occasionally reaching into my pocket to pull out my iPhone, which was not there.

2) Leave town. If I had not left town, I would have inexorably been drawn into needs I sensed in the area.

3) Open the trip with activities. We spent two weeks on a remote beach, but these were not the first two weeks of the trip. If I had opened up the sabbatical with stillness, my mind would have been preoccupied with the ministry back home. Instead, Kaye and I toured New York City non-stop before going to Kansas City to teach a class at a seminary. And while some would say the teaching was not rest, it was different from my normal routine, and my kids were able to stay on campus with me. We played each afternoon and evening and had a blast.

4) Know the cost is worth it. Some churches cover the cost of a sabbatical; others cover the

cost of a sabbatical if the purpose is study or ministry preparation; and others leave the cost to the pastor without any expectation for study or preparation. If the cost is on you, realize that you get this opportunity rarely in your life. Realize what you spend is an investment in your ministry, your faith, and your family.

5) Ask others to help. My parents were invaluable during the sabbatical. They watched the kids for us for multiple weeks so that we could do several things alone.

6) Mentally resign. The only way I could completely disconnect was to resign, in a sense, from my role at the church. I never told anyone I was resigning. I did not submit a letter of resignation or make plans for another role. But I completely released the ministry to the Lord, something I should do continually, I know. I thanked Him for the season He had given me at the church and in my mind walked away. And it was so healthy. He reminded me through the process that He is the One who builds His church. I am not the one who is ultimately responsible. He is. He has invited me to serve His bride because He wants me, not because He needs me for anything. The mental resignation made the trip so liberating and refreshing.

7) Ease out and ease back in. Instead of having a hard stop to my responsibilities, I put my vacation email responder on about four days before my sabbatical would begin. During that time, I still checked my email and responded to ones that were critical. It was a way to give staff and others one final opportunity to have a conversation before I was going to be away for many weeks. In the same way, I re-engaged about 3 days before my sabbatical was going to be over. I wrote down key lessons from the time away and some goals for the next season of ministry. I replied to all of my emails and then saved them as a draft so as not to alert people to send me new emails. On the eve of my first day back, I sent all the emails. I was ready to hit the ground running the next day.

Two years later, Kaye and the kids still remember and talk about the sabbatical. And I remember some of the sweet times of fellowship I enjoyed with them and with the Lord. Reading Romans on the beach as the sun went down was very centering for me. Pastors, if the Lord gives you an opportunity for a sabbatical, take full advantage of the opportunity. It will be a blessing to you, your family, and the church.

Read more from Eric [here](#).