

## **Sabbatical Story by Murray Swalm**

A peculiar indefinable weariness had settled over my soul. It was the kind of weariness that feels like tired but for which rest seems little solution. I had served in this church, my first and only church, for seventeen years and I was feeling the wear of the years. I was not in crisis and the church was healthy. But I was aware that all was not well and that I needed to get my heart lifted up once again.

I began to share some of my feelings with a couple of trusted leaders in our church and broached the idea of taking a sabbatical. We were just completing a major facility development, I was in the throes of completing my D.Min project and I was feeling like I was losing perspective. My immediate reaction was to just take a break but as I talked it over with my wife and our leaders I realized that I needed to do something more intentional and so the concept of a sabbatical began to take form.

I had read several years previously an article by Bill Hybels that mapped out the three gauges of our lives – physical, spiritual and emotional. I recalled that particular article, pulled it out and took some time for careful self-examination. It was clear that I had overextended myself emotionally and that I had depleted other areas of my life in order to compensate. In our planning for sabbatical I knew that I needed to not just rest, I needed to be filled back up. I was spending most of my time doing things that were outside of my giftedness. I had given up the things that renewed me in order to ‘get things done.’ And I was paying the price – and my family paid a big price along with me. Both of our children were in college at the time so they were not as aware of the issues as my wife. She needed some time along with me to rediscover who we ought to be.

As we shared these things with our Elder board they suggested that what we should seriously consider is visiting some mission fields to get a broader perspective on ministry and the way God was working in our world. We discussed this with our denominational overseas director and he recommended that we visit a field that was wide open to the gospel and a field that was very closed to the gospel. As we discussed these possibilities it became clear to all of us that this was a good approach. As well, I knew that taking a course was something that was very revitalizing for me. I had a dream of going to Israel and was aware of the Jerusalem University College and their short term programs. I was able to enroll in their three week program. We also set aside some time for my wife to be with her family (I went alone to Israel) and then we spent the rest of the time together in Thailand and Brazil. Time was set aside for retreat on Vancouver Island at a retreat house and there was some time just for rest and relaxation. The sabbatical was presented to the congregation and sufficient funds were raised almost immediately to fund the entire time away.

Four months of sabbatical proved to be just about right for us. It was enough time to do a number of things without hurrying. Like most things there were some things we would adjust but it became a turning point for us. On our return I preached a seven part sermon series on, “The seven things I learned while on Sabbatical.” As well we hosted an

evening at the church expressing appreciation to the whole congregation for this incredible gift to us.

## **Sabbatical**

Anyone who has been involved in pastoral ministry is aware of the significant number of people who drop out of ministry due to a multiplicity of factors. It has been my observation that many of these individuals got to the 'end of their rope' and didn't know what to do next. I would like to suggest that a good number of these individuals would not have walked away from their ministry if they had been given the opportunity to take a sabbatical.

Historically sabbaticals have a theological foundation. Sabbath is rooted in the creation narrative with the 7 day week culminating in the 7<sup>th</sup> day as a day for 'Sabbath Rest.' This same rhythm is carried into the agricultural practice of leaving the field fallow in the 7<sup>th</sup> year (Ex. 23:10-11) and the year of release (Deut. 15:1-11). The Sabbatical year (Lev. 25:1-7; Neh. 10:31b) leads to the practice of Jubilee in the 49<sup>th</sup> year which is again based on the 7 year cycle. We are not suggesting that the concept of Sabbatical must be practiced in this strict cycle but rather the practice of intentional rest and renewal (Sabbatical) is critical to effective and long term ministry. The practice of Sabbatical must not be understood as an exercise of weakness or a 'free' and very long holiday but rather as the practice of wisdom. Sabbatical helps place us within the rhythm of God's creative and re-creative processes.

The unique demands of the pastoral ministry suggest that a sabbatical can be a very important element, not only in the 'maintenance' of the pastor but in the development of the pastor. Sabbaticals can be very valuable in helping the pastor care for their own souls as well as the emotional and physical aspects of their lives. An effective sabbatical takes all of these factors into consideration as the sabbatical is planned.

Some of the demands of ministry are so interwoven into the fabric of pastoral life that we often miss what these demands mean and do to the individual. It has been suggested that one hour of personal one-on-one counseling is similar to the demands of three hours of physical labour. Anyone who has spent time preaching knows the emotional, physical and spiritual toll such activity demands. Much of a pastor's time is committed to working through the unique complexities of individual lives and the issues that they face. Along with these more 'pastoral' responsibilities come the realities of operating the institutional church. Care for administrative demands, working with various boards and committees, overseeing staff, keeping an eye on the budget, strategizing ministry, meeting denominational expectations and care for a facility can create an enormous stress level. Most pastors entered into their vocation with a desire to be part of bringing spiritual transformation to the lives of their parishioners and find themselves involved in tasks and work that seem far removed from reasons they came into ministry. This tension can be destructive to their passion and purpose and reduces the pastor to feeling like they are simply maintainers of a system that seems to be unproductive and erosive to their

own souls. Expectations that others have of us or we have of ourselves can be overwhelming. Many times these expectations are unreasonable and unless they are confronted can frustrate the pastor to the point of ministry paralysis.

### Reasons for Sabbatical

The reasons for sabbatical are as varied as the people who need them. Physical, emotional or spiritual exhaustion; the need to *revision* the future (personal or ministry); for renewal of passion and spirit; to revitalize our marriage or family relationships; to gain perspective are all reasons for sabbatical.

### Sabbatical vs. Vacation

The Sabbatical is more intentional in it's' purpose than vacation. Vacation is supposed to be an annual break from the responsibilities for rest and relaxation. A Sabbatical is the intentional separation from current responsibilities to find restoration for the soul through the purposeful regeneration of the Holy Spirit.

There are times in our ministry when we feel 'overcome' by this need to just 'get away.' Vacation can be a wonderful way of finding rest and recovery but there are times when we need more than a mere vacation has to offer. We cannot ask a vacation to do for us what it was never designed to do. There are times when we need to become more intentional and set aside (sanctify) some time for the special purpose of 'soul restoration' that only a well planned sabbatical can provide.

Well planned and regular Sabbaticals are essential to the well being of a pastor. Sabbaticals can be the primary means by which a pastor remains healthy and productive instead of experiencing burn out or other hazards of inattention to the soul.

### Determining the Need for Sabbatical

Often determining the need for sabbatical is the most important hurdle to clear. If the pastor is at the point of burn out their sabbatical will look much different than one who has been in the practice of taking sabbatical. Therefore it is important to go through a time of personal examination to determine the nature and type of sabbatical that would be most appropriate.

Bill Hybels used the illustration of the gauges on a car instrument panel (Leadership Journal, Vol. 12, Number 2, Spring 1991). Each of us has 3 gauges – a spiritual gauge, a physical gauge and an emotional gauge. Each gauge measures the amount of energy we have left in that particular tank. Bill Hybels said that one day he 'hit the wall' hard and crashed. He thought that if he just concentrated on getting some physical rest and some spiritual renewal that he would be fine. It was a natural assumption because we *feel* physically tired and because we are pastors we *know* that spiritual restoration is always necessary. But it never really worked for him – he was still exhausted. I knew something was wrong when I would go away for vacation and would come back feeling

strong and invigorated only to walk through the doors of the church and feel like I couldn't look another person in the face – I felt empty – nothing to give – and all of that right after vacation!

What most pastors don't realize are the *emotional* draining that ministry takes. Our emotional tanks do all the giving and the least of the receiving. Contrary to many different kinds of jobs, ministry is primarily one of emotional giving. The emotional tank is the one that receives the least attention and so is rarely refueled. Symptoms of emotional depletion can be such things as anger when the phone rings, incessant television watching, irrational reactions to normal everyday interactions, lack of laughter and an overall lack of capacity for any kind of stress. In a word, escapism is the way we survive our days. A little self-examination will usually reveal that those things that have normally been emotionally renewing have slowly fallen away and in their place our lives have been filled with the 'have to do's.' When one of our tanks becomes dangerously depleted we usually borrow from one of the other tanks in order to keep going. Those who are emotionally depleted have stayed alive on the borrowed energy from their physical and spiritual tanks; but when those tanks start to dry up the individual stands in real danger of burn out.

There is a powerful interconnectedness between these three tanks. It is unwise to think of them as completely separate. When we have given ourselves physically to something it can be very renewing for our spirit and sometimes it can be depleting – dependent upon the nature of the physical exercise – but it will have an effect. Sometimes when I've had more than I can bear I will get on my mountain bike and ride as hard and as long as I can and it has a wonderful affect on my spirit – my emotions. But if I have had an extremely emotionally demanding day and I go home and 'rest' in front of the television I feel physically drained, sluggish and weak. The same is true spiritually. When I have spent time in prayer or fasting and am aware of God's grace in my life it has a dramatic affect on my emotional life – I feel encouraged and strong. But it is quite possible to ignore one area of our lives and deplete it to the point where whatever we do in another area of our lives there is not enough strength to shore it up.

No matter what our reasons for sabbatical may be we need the help of those around us to gain proper perspective so that we can design a sabbatical best suited for our needs. I highly recommend that those considering sabbatical engage in conversation with a mentor, spiritual friend, peer or other individual who knows you well and can ask pointed and direct questions about the condition of your soul, body and mind. When you have determined what areas of your life need the most attention then you need to ask the question, "What refuels my tank?" We can usually quickly determine what drains us but we often lose sight of what refuels us. We fall into the mistaken notion that if we *stop doing what drains us* then we will begin to feel better. We feel good that the pain stopped but we have done nothing to refuel. A friend of mine realized he had stopped playing the guitar and that playing the guitar had always been a way for him to emotionally reenergize. I found great renewal in taking my D.Min. Classes. Another friend of mine said that was the worst thing he could possibly do. Perhaps it is taking time to read a good novel, walk the forest paths, do some writing, but it all needs to be

intentionally designed to reinvigorate the areas of your life that have been depleted. A valued friend can be very helpful in assisting you to sort that out. Let me quote from a friend of mine:

As I thought about Sabbatical leave, I wasn't sure what it should look like. What I really needed was help in unpacking the need and planning the process to meet the need. The best thing I did was to talk to a friend who had gone on a Sabbatical leave. We met over the course of a few months discussing what a reboot in my life and ministry would look like. The value of that time together came in the form of deeper insight into what I did and did not need. The process also gave me time to think out loud through the issues of my soul. We talked about issues like: How did I get here/What was I feeling/Where do I go from here/What is the next step/What else? These times of discussion gave me clarification in identifying the need and determining the process to meet that need.

What my friend discovered through that process was that he needed to “not give out but to take in!” He found that his needs lay in the area of:

- Refilling his tanks (physical, emotional, spiritual)
- Renewing his relationships (marriage, family etc)
- Resourcing his ministry (personal ministry development)

These insights helped him strategically design a sabbatical that would address each one of these needs. Until these needs were understood the sabbatical would have been merely a ‘nice time away.’

### Designing the Sabbatical

Once you have understood your need for sabbatical and have identified the areas that need address it is time to begin to design the sabbatical. This process usually begins with your church leadership. If your church already has a sabbatical policy you can begin to work within that. If your church doesn't then you need to sit down with your key leadership team and begin to discuss with them the need for sabbatical. Often a paper like this can be helpful for them to understand what you mean by sabbatical. Be careful to take adequate time for the leadership to be able to engage with you in this process. Remember that you have been thinking about this much longer than they have and so it is important for them to have enough time to ‘catch up’ with you.

Generally the preparation process will take four to six months in order for the plans to be set in place and all of the logistics to be established. This of course is assuming that this is a planned and not an emergency sabbatical. There are occasions where emergency sabbaticals are necessary but the proper practice of sabbatical will help control the necessity of an emergency sabbatical.

One of the first responsibilities of the Sabbatical planning team (key leadership, pastor etc. established by the board) is to ensure that the spouse and their needs are given equal and careful consideration in the planning process. Often they are the ‘silent’ partner in the struggles of ministry and have even fewer outlets or opportunities in which to deal

with the stress and demands of ministry. At the same time the desire of the spouse needs to be fully honored. They need to not feel pressured to conform to some predetermined sabbatical design. They need to feel free to participate in the process according to their own wishes.

Here are some of the issues the Sabbatical planning team needs to address:

1. Length of Sabbatical – Sometimes a short sabbatical (1 or 2 months) may meet a short term need. However, most sabbaticals need to be at least 3 months or more in length. Otherwise we end up defeating the purpose of sabbatical by ‘hurrying’ through the sabbatical in order to get everything done! We need to remember that this time is being set aside (sanctified) for the purpose of God’s work in our lives. This work should not be hurried or rushed. If the sabbatical is properly practiced it can provide longevity for the pastor and congregation relationship.
2. Financial Issues – It is general practice for the congregation to continue the salary and benefits uninterrupted during the sabbatical. If there are additional costs such as travel or course work the sabbatical planning team can determine how these costs should be cared for. Some churches take a special offering. Others expect the pastor to carry the cost. Some share the cost and so on. For those wishing to implement sabbatical as a regular practice it would be wise to set aside some funds each year in the budget so that they would accumulate in preparation for the sabbatical year.
3. Local Leadership Issues – Each church according to its size and needs will need to determine how they will deal with the ‘leadership vacuum’ caused by the absence of the pastor. For churches with one pastor it will of course require a significant amount of work in finding an interim pastor or working out a schedule for lay leadership. Often the denominational leadership can be very helpful here in making the local church aware of options. Larger churches with staff can often reshuffle staff responsibilities for the relatively short span of time that the sabbatical will be in place. It is generally a good experience for the church to learn to be less dependent upon pastoral leadership and to realize that they are truly a body of believers together.
4. Location of the Sabbatical – I realize that my position here may be more controversial but it has been my observation that Sabbaticals taken in the home location are frequently less effective and a poor choice. We often think that we have to be at home because of family issues or cost etc. I believe that it is as important to take a sabbatical from our location as it is from our ministry. The two are very closely tied together and we need a different location to help us gain different perspective. If we stay at home we remain the pastor in our community – it is unavoidable. We encounter people at the grocery store, on the street, at events and in our neighborhood. We can overcome this by finding different locations for parts of our sabbatical. Often people in our congregations have retreat homes or cabins that they would be glad to loan for sabbatical purposes. Sometimes people will help us by pooling air miles so we can get away. There are denominational camps, low cost retreat homes and other options that can be pursued. Sometimes the timing of our sabbatical can also deal with issues of

- family more effectively. Taking sabbatical during the vacation months can be good for both the family and the church.
5. Congregation and Pastor – It is the sabbatical planning team’s responsibility to teach the congregation how to respond to their pastor’s sabbatical. They need to be instructed that this is a *positive* exercise and that the pastor is not leaving them, it’s a time for personal renewal so the congregation can be even more effectively served in the future. The congregation needs to be assured that the needs of the congregation will still be cared for and how that will take place. The congregation will also need to receive instruction on how to give the pastor and the family the space they will need – not to phone or contact them but to treat them normally whenever they see them in public. It is also very helpful to engage the congregation in actively praying for the pastor and their family during the sabbatical both publicly and privately.
  6. Activities – As we have noted elsewhere these will largely be determined by the needs of the pastor. However, I believe that every sabbatical has some non-negotiables. First of all there should be an expectation that the pastor and their spouse will go to a retreat center designed to minister to the needs of pastors who are on sabbatical. There are many such retreat centers. And the congregation needs to pay for these costs. This is essential for the pastor to be able to understand themselves and God’s working in their lives more clearly. Some pastors may resist this expectation but I believe it lies at the heart of what Sabbatical means. Sabbaticals should also include some time for ministry development, whatever that may look like for the pastor. This does not need to be heavy or academic but it is that part of ensuring that the pastor is ‘taking in’ during the time of sabbatical. All other activities are wide open for negotiation during the planning phase. Some suggestions are personal retreat, reading plans, writing and journaling, hiking, courses, travel to mission fields, travel to other churches, days of reflection and quiet and so on. Be creative together so that the sabbatical is intentional but leisurely.
  7. Reentry and Reporting – Reentry to ministry and congregational life can sometimes be rather delicate. The pastor may be anxious to get back into leadership but others have had responsibility for those leadership roles. The sabbatical planning team can help both parties ‘ease’ back into their respective roles by helping them sit down and debrief their experiences together and to bring each other up to speed on what has been happening. Finally, the congregation has made a significant contribution to their pastor’s life and it is good if the pastor were to bring a strong report of what has taken place in their life. It could be a Sunday evening or a series of messages – but reporting is essential. It is really an expression of thanks and appreciation.

### Pastors Preparation for Sabbatical

The pastor should get a complete physical done by their doctor before going on Sabbatical. This assures that there are no hidden physical factors that may affect the value of the Sabbatical. Working through details like house sitting, child care, finances, travel, scheduling and so on will take considerable time. The pastor needs to plan well

enough ahead that preparation for sabbatical does not become an overwhelming stress in and of itself.

The following is a check list to help you form a sabbatical policy for your local church. My comments are designed to help you make some of these decisions.

### **DEVELOPING A SABBATICAL POLICY: Options to Consider**

After reviewing a variety of sabbatical policies from Christian Reformed Churches the following suggestions are offered to churches who are considering adopting a policy for their pastor. Under each heading are a number of points. The idea is not to use all of the ideas listed but to create a customized policy by choosing from them.

*A full-time pastor serves in a unique position. The demands of pastoral ministry are great and despite vacation time and occasional continuing education, a pastor is often physically, emotionally, and spiritually drained.* – Covenant CRC, Grand Rapids, MI

#### 1. Definition of Sabbatical

- Extended leave for the purpose of continuing education
- Period of rest after seven years – Hebrew cultural-religious concept
- Period of time for professional development and spiritual renewal
- Opportunity to lie fallow for revitalization of the body, mind, and soul

#### 2. Purpose or Rationale

- Benefits
  - Renewed commitment to the church
  - Enhanced job performance
  - Staying current with professional developments
  - Opportunity to pursue an area of theological interest
  - Replenished energy stores
  - Renewed emotional health
  - Increased spiritual vitality
  - Acquirement of new skills
  - Rediscovered zeal for ministry
  - Personal growth and refreshment
  - Increased effectiveness in ministry
  - Improvement in one or more competencies
  - Rekindled sense of God's calling
  - Nurture of the body and soul
- Beneficiaries
  - Pastor
  - Pastor's family
  - Congregation
  - Board

### 3. Activities on Sabbatical

- Teaching
- Writing
- Working on a special project
- Reflection
- Continuing education
- Personal refreshment
- Academic courses
- Spiritual retreat
- Receiving pastoral care
- Ministry related travel

*Note: sabbatical not intended to supplement vacation time or to be seen as “free time”*

### 4. Eligibility

- Full time ordained pastors
- Ministry associates
- Full time non-ordained ministry staff
- Pastor must have continuously served the congregation for “x” years. (Most common time frame is 5 years.)
- Pastor is encouraged to consider applying for a sabbatical on a regular basis.

### 5. Terms

- May be taken after “x” years of continuous service
- First full year after sabbatical becomes year 1 of the next “x” years of service
- Following initial sabbatical, subsequent ones may be taken after “x” years of additional service
- For a period up to “x” months (Usual range is 2 – 6 months)
- To be taken all at once
- Maybe taken in segments
- In multi-staff setting, only one pastor may take a sabbatical during a given year
- Separate and distinct from continuing education and vacation time
- Pastor completely released from all duties during sabbatical
- Normally taken away from where church is located
- Sabbatical time may/may not be accumulated
- Pastor will/will not receive continuing education time during year sabbatical is taken
- Pastor will/will not receive full vacation time during year sabbatical is taken

### 6. Conditions

- Plan must be submitted to Board “x” months prior to the sabbatical (Six months is fairly typical)

- Plan must be submitted to Board before budget has been determined for fiscal year in which sabbatical is to be taken
- Plan must include: project proposal, time and work schedule, reporting schedule, budget, and description of benefits to both pastor and congregation
- Course of study must lead/doesn't need to lead to an academic degree
- Pastor provides additional "x" years of service after sabbatical (Most common time frame is 2 years)

#### 7. Duties of Sabbatical Planning Team

- Find replacements or an interim pastor for the time of sabbatical
- Decide on visiting and/or pastoral care needed by congregation
- Check into denominational funds available for offsetting expenses incurred by pulpit replacement or interim pastors
- Determine that sabbatical plan will benefit both pastor and congregation
- Monitor pastor's activities during sabbatical
- Encourage pastor to consider shortfalls or gaps in his/her pastoral skill set to address during sabbatical

#### 8. Financial

- Pastor receives full salary and benefits during sabbatical (Most common choice)
- Pastor receives "x%" of his/her salary and benefits during sabbatical
- Pastor is/is not reimbursed for tuition, living expenses, lodging and travel expenses incurred during sabbatical
- Special offering is taken to help offset pastor's expenses during sabbatical
- Amount budgeted for continuing education for year in which sabbatical is taken will/will not go towards pastor's expenses during sabbatical
- Pastor encouraged to search out grants/donations/funds for expenses for sabbatical
- Pastor may/may not earn income in addition to regular salary during sabbatical
- Pastor may request grant from church's sabbatical fund for up to "x" dollars for expenses incurred during sabbatical
- Sabbatical not granted unless budget has sufficient funds

#### 9. Reporting

- Pastor sends monthly reports to Board/congregation during sabbatical
- Pastor submits written report to Board within "x" months of returning after sabbatical (Most common time frame is 2 months)
- Pastor gives oral report to the congregation within "x" months of returning after the sabbatical (Most common time frame is 2 months)
- Final evaluation of benefits received by congregation is conducted one year after end of sabbatical
- Upon return, pastor and Board consider best course to be followed as pastor re-enters life of congregation—allowing evaluation of pastor's responsibilities, new opportunities, and adjustments to pastor's job description

## Resources

### Articles:

- Bill Hybels, Reading your gauges, Leadership Journal, Vol. 12, Number 2, Spring 1991)
- Jonathan and Rachel Ward, What Missionaries Need to Know About Burnout, posted on [www.christianity.ca](http://www.christianity.ca). The article may be found at <http://christianity.ca/mission/global/2007/04.001.html>. This excellent article has several helpful guidelines for pastors to help prevent burnout.
- Why You Should Give Your Pastor a Sabbatical, Roy Oswald, The Alban Institute, 2001. Video.
- Journeying toward Renewal: A Spiritual Companion for Pastoral Sabbaticals, Melissa Bane Sevier, The Alban Institute, 2002.
- The Contemplative Pastor, Eugene H. Peterson, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989.

### Sabbatical Programs

- Louisville Institute's Study Grants for Pastoral Leaders Program ([www.louisville-institute.org](http://www.louisville-institute.org))
- Lilly Endowment Inc.'s National Clergy Renewal Program ([www.clergyrenewal.org](http://www.clergyrenewal.org))
  - For more information, contact Ellen Ratmeyer, manager for Ministry Services, at (212) 870-2957

### Sabbatical Retreat Centres

- See Focus on the family Canada, Clergy Care Network at [www.clergycare.ca](http://www.clergycare.ca) or phone 1 888 525-3749 for recommendations regarding retreat centres for your specific needs.
- There are several retreat centres across North America. Contact your denomination office in your area for additional references that may be more suitable to your local situation.