



How to Take a ‘Sabbatical’

“...He (God) rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done.”

Genesis 2:2

“Stop the world. I want to get off!” He’d been thinking it for weeks, now he said it out loud. “It seems like there’s no end to the constant pressure of meetings, visitation schedules, Sunday sermons, counseling and even disagreeable parishioners. It’s always give and give and give, but rarely receive.”

Pastors, associates, and ministry leaders are called to lives of service to others. Such devotion is commendable and part of the calling, but what happens when endlessly helping others begins to take its toll? Oftentimes devotion to others and the concomitant pressures exceed one’s internal resources?

Focus on the Family (1998) reports that 80% of pastors surveyed are discouraged or are dealing with depression, as are 84% of wives surveyed. Taking a Sabbatical is a much needed remedy for the fatigue and frustration of ministry. Stress and fatigue have a compounding effect on the leader of an organization. My good friend Dr. Doug Talley describes how “I was oblivious to how stress builds up over an extended period of time, much like multiple coats of paint on a wall. The result is that ten years of leading doesn’t just equal ten years of stress. Much like interest compounds on savings, stress compounds so that ten years of leading may equal fifteen years of stress.”

Scripture supports periodic rejuvenation as vital in all areas of life. Both Genesis and Leviticus speak of the Sabbath as time for rest and renewal. The Old Testament declares a Sabbath day (seventh day) as a day of personal rest and focus on God. The Sabbatical year (seventh year) is when the land was to lay at rest (uncultivated) and the harvest of previous years was to be stored up to carry one through until a post Sabbatical crop was planted and harvested. Just like the soil, humans need a season to lie fallow for revitalization of the body, mind and soul.

If you have been on the pressure treadmill and are nearing burnout, perhaps now is a good time to consider taking a Sabbatical. Consider the following tips on How to Take a Sabbatical so that upon your return you are refreshed, focused and energized.

Tips for Taking a Sabbatical

1. **There is no absolute formula for taking a Sabbatical.** Many denominations and even academic institutions have written policies on when and how to take a Sabbatical. Often paid Sabbaticals are granted after five to seven years of full time dedicated service. A few religious organizations encourage ‘mini-Sabbaticals’ after three years. However, if burnout is imminent a Sabbatical should be considered regardless of how long the individual has been serving.
2. **How long a Sabbatical lasts usually depends upon the person’s need and the organizations policy.** Typically, organizations offer three months of paid Sabbatical after five to seven years of service. A few will allow up to six months of paid Sabbatical leave. Fewer will allow six or more months of paid or unpaid leave. Mini-Sabbaticals lasting a week, a quarter, or even a month, are offered to some ministers. However, when a leader is in dire need, Sabbath time can be suited to fit the situation.
3. **A Sabbatical is not a vacation.** Rather it is a time for intentional renewal and personal revitalization. Relaxation, recreation and hobbies can be a part of the sabbatical experience but they are not the primary focus. The intent of a sabbatical is to allow the minister time to recharge hope and vision. It is a time to be nurtured in faith, rekindled in passion, refocused in priorities and recaptured by the vision and heart of God.
4. **If you are married, make provision for your spouse and family.** Because ministry demands so much from family and spouse, one’s Sabbatical should include planned quality time for each. Relational renewal is a necessary component of personal renewal. Setting aside a week or more devoted to marriage renewal or family activities is an important component of one’s Sabbatical plan.
5. **Create a Sabbatical Plan before you take Sabbath time.** A written plan detailing one’s intended activities while on Sabbatical is a typical requirement by most religious organizations. The plan doesn’t need to be overly detailed but should minimally include the following: rationale for Sabbatical that details the major personal goal to be accomplished, a plan for how the ongoing responsibilities of the minister will be handled during his/her absence, evaluation criteria for judging the effectiveness of the Sabbatical, and major events/activities that will be pursued during the Sabbath time.
6. **Less is best while on Sabbatical.** A common mistake of most ministers is to schedule every minute of the Sabbath time, inadvertently continuing the fast pace and performance orientation. In the quiet moments will come the needed introspection, reflection and connection with God. This is a time to allow the Spirit’s work to bring forth the deeper unbidden and unconscious. As one minister aptly stated “busyness is a curse to Godliness.”

7. **Make time for physical renewal.** Too often ministers ignore their health. Sustaining pastoral excellence is all about skills, abilities, character and health. Studies indicate that poorly sustained health contributes significantly to burnout, depression and failure. Sabbath is a great time to focus once again on diet, discipline and exercise. Caring for and renewing the entire self is imperative to one's success upon return from Sabbatical.
8. **Prepare your staff and others ahead of time.** To increase the likelihood that your Sabbatical goes smoothly, prepare your staff for continuing the ministry while you are absent. Share your expectations for receiving calls, texts and emails with staff as well as with friends and relatives.
9. **Ease back into your work routine.** When returning from Sabbatical, don't have a full schedule of activities you must immediately tend to. Take a few weeks to ease into your routine. Part of what you hopefully will learn on Sabbatical is a much healthier pace. If overwork and frantic schedules have been a part of your pre-Sabbatical experience, you may want to implement a more balanced schedule with built in margin.
10. **Document what you learned.** The Hebrew children built a memorial of rocks to commemorate their miraculously crossing of the Red Sea. Think through what you learned while on Sabbatical that may help you lead better. Document the lessons learned and memorialize them as anchors to a new and thriving future. A pastor friend of mine hung a one by one and a half foot picture of a fish he caught, reminding him of his need to slow down and schedule time off.

Note: To understand more about the causes, symptoms and remedies for weariness and burnout visit the Resource Section on Burnout and Resilience at <http://www.leadersthatlast.org>