Pastoral Letter | August 26, 2025

Siblings in Christ,

It has been a joy to be back at First Pres. After 12 weeks of sabbatical – interspersed with 3 weeks of summer youth trips – August 6 was my first day back in the office and Sunday, the 10th, my first worship service. So many of you have greeted me with a handshake or a hug, a warm word and a welcome smile. Thank you, friends.

And then, out of the goodness of your heart, you've asked, "How was sabbatical?" And I haven't had a good, pithy answer. The short answer is, of course, "good." Delightful. Lovely. Relaxing. But there was no book that completely changed my ideas about ministry. No trip of a lifetime (see below). No lightning in a bottle. So after the gift of so much time away, perhaps a better, fuller answer is in order.

The heart of my sabbatical was time to attend to my health. Nothing was wrong, per se, but it had become harder and harder to exercise regularly and fit into my clothes. After watching many others join Burn Boot Camp, I did the same – exercising just about every weekday I was in town and was healthy. Coupled with a new medication, I feel healthier and have lost some weight, both of which are trends I believe can continue even after my return to FPC and the resumption of the school year. One of the things I love about Burn is how supportive it is. It's heavily female – a context I'm used to as a male youth minister in a field with majority women – and there's nothing quite like being lapped literally and figuratively by a visibly pregnant woman.

I was also able to spend three weeks at Montreat. The first two were for conferences – Discovering Renewal (which was a dud, alas) and Arts, Recreation & Worship (which is one of my favorite weeks of the year). ARW is for youth ministers, Christian educators and anyone else interested in those ministries or simply being creative. It was a joy to see old friends, make new ones, and learn something new about youth ministry. Lenore Champion attended as well, so it was great to see her. The third week was one of vacation with my family, always a lovely week for us in my very favorite place.

Our big trip was supposed to be two weeks in Scotland and England. It was – however not just quite for me. I contracted an illness on the flight over (masks from now on!) and so by Day 3, I was feeling lesser. I did manage to join Laurie, Tate and Lucy for most of the first week of walking the Scottish coast, which was beautiful with highs in the low 60s. By the second week, in London, I was down for the count. This was not ideal for anyone, but the silver lining for me was that I didn't miss any exercise time, which as I said, was the heart of my sabbatical.

So that's the less-than-pithy answer. Thank you for the gift of such time. You didn't personally sign off on it, but FPC has a great sabbatical policy approved by our session and no one in the church bats an eye at it. I am particularly thankful to our staff for all the ways they stepped in to fill in my gaps, and to Heidi Biermann and Mimi Dunn for serving as Bridge Youth Ministers. And it's good to be back.

Grace & Peace,
John