

Sabbatical greatly impacts Dakota pastor, both personally and in his church

Answering the call to serve as a pastor is not for the faint of heart. Preaching the Word, equipping the saints to do ministry, shepherding the flock, and doing the work of an evangelist is a full-time calling, whether the pastor is bivocational or fully funded.

Will Page has been in ministry since 2007, been in the Dakotas since 2012, and has served as pastor at First Baptist Church in Miller, SD, since 2016. He said, "I never took more than a few days break in those years." A medical scare a few months ago opened his eyes to the reality that he was experiencing burnout.

Page said his situation became so severe that, "I ended up in the emergency room with a heart attack and clinically depressed. 'Heart attack' is what the doctor at the emergency room called it. An angiogram found no damage to his heart, but the doctors did confirm that Page was experiencing depression. He discovered that, "mental stress and depression is as real as a bacterial infection and, like an infection, can be treated. But I had to admit that I did indeed have them."

An "older pastor and Christian brother" told the Miller pastor that he needed to take a sabbatical, something that Page had not thought was possible for a bivocational pastor like himself.

For a pastor, a sabbatical is a period of several weeks away from his ministry. He is paid while he is away. Sabbaticals can serve various purposes. They can be, as with Page, a time to be renewed and refocused on the ministry to which God has called him. Others use the time to study and grow in particular areas of their ministry. The pastor may even engage in other unique kinds of ministry.

Page was encouraged to contact the Dakota Baptist Convention staff where he learned that the state convention had resources set aside to help pastors take a sabbatical. These resources were designed to provide the church with funds for pulpit supply and to assist the pastor with taking this time away from his ministry.

Regardless of the individual pastor's purpose, the common ingredient to all sabbaticals is the development of a plan for how the pastor intends to use the time away. Built into each plan is time for rest, relaxation, and reconnecting with family, as well as time and activity to help the pastor connect with his calling and the Master that he serves in this calling.

Page developed a plan that would involve extended periods of rest and family time, as well as pursuing some long-neglected hobbies. Built also into his activity was a strategic plan to visit other churches. This would enable him to sit under biblical preaching for an extended period and to see what God was doing in and through other congregations in the Dakotas. "It is one thing to hear about something being done in a church service or in a church's various ministries," Page observed. "It is another thing to see it being done."

Page recently completed his sabbatical and shared that it changed his life. He said that he did not necessarily learn anything new about himself, but that he was, "reminded that I abide in Christ. I was reminded that I need to give myself, 'continually to prayer and the ministry of the word.' (Acts 6:4)." He continued, "I was reminded that I need to ask for wisdom and that our Lord will give it. I was reminded that I must take care of my physical, spiritual, and mental health. I was reminded that I need to put on the whole armor of God."

The Miller pastor did learn and was reminded of some critical things about leading a church, such as, not trying to do everything himself, even if he needed to wait on God to provide someone for that role. Visiting other Dakota churches, also demonstrated to him that no church, "can do every ministry needed in a community." He advises others to, "instead look for the ministry that the church can do well and do that."

Perhaps the most important thing that happened in Page's life was to rediscover that, "as the pastor my priority must start with prayer and ministry of the Word."

When he finished his sabbatical, Page prepared a report about his experiences. He encourages other pastors to seriously consider the value of taking a sabbatical and to contact the DBC staff for help in preparing to do this.

Page's full report is attached at the end of this article.