

Report on Sabbatical by Will Page

In this report I will answer the following questions about sabbaticals:

Why and when should a pastor take a sabbatical?

What should I do on a sabbatical?

What did I learn about myself when I took a sabbatical?

What did I learn about leading a church?

How would I advise someone to take a sabbatical?

Why and when should a pastor take a sabbatical?

Do I need to take a sabbatical? That is a question I had never asked myself and probably never would have. Instead of asking myself, I was told by an older pastor and Christian brother that I needed to take a sabbatical. A heart attack or severe panic attack confirmed his assessment of my spiritual, emotional and physical condition. A sabbatical is not part of the mindset of most bi-vocational pastors. A sabbatical for bi-vocational pastors is possible for pastors in the Dakota Baptist Convention. It is possible because we cooperate as sister churches in the convention and our associations.

The questions why and when go together because the answers are a function of time. In my own case I was called to the Dakotas in 2012. I was called to First Baptist Church of Miller in June of 2016. I never took more than a few days break in those nine years. There is a cliché that applies. That is “burnout.”

Any word that is overused becomes by, by definition, a cliché. “Burnout” has become a cliché. The word describes a real problem that I have dealt with and a sabbatical helped. “Burnout” in the ministry is real and dangerous.

As a pastor, I am called by our Lord and Savior to help fulfill the Great Commission and minister to a congregation. Consider the words of James:

James 3:1, “My brethren let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.”

James 1:5, “If any of you lacks wisdom let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach and it will be given to him.”

Burnout and, ultimately, depression gradually happen when we continue to do the same thing week after week. As time passes ministry becomes a routine that we do, then the routine

becomes drudgery. Eventually we realize, or our Lord shows us, that we are doing ministry as a habit without reference to Him. Let us remember James 3:1 and 1:5 applies to us pastors too. We should ask for wisdom.

Brothers, I let my problem with “burnout” 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. After an angiogram, a cardiologist told me they could find nothing wrong with my heart. Mental stress was the diagnosis. They did find something wrong with my mind—depression. Mental stress and depression is as real as a bacterial infection and, like an infection, they can be treated. But I had to admit that I did indeed have them.

We have responsibility to God, our families and the congregations He has called us to serve. The Holy Spirit was serious when He inspired James to write, we shall receive a stricter judgment. The Holy Spirit is also serious when He promises to give us wisdom.

Benjamin Franklin said, “Experience keeps an expensive school which the wise will seldom consult.” I learned from experience that a sabbatical is something that a pastor will eventually need. It is wise for a pastor to take a break from daily ministry and preaching for a few weeks every five years or so. I was foolish to let stress put me in the hospital. Experience does keep an expensive and painful school.

What should I do on a sabbatical?

There are many different reasons and ways to do a sabbatical. Here is the pattern I followed:

Relax. For two weeks do nothing. Make no decisions about your ministry. Relax.

Visit other churches. For the first two weeks doing nothing does not mean do not go to church. Pastors do not get to visit other churches very often. Take advantage of the time visit other churches and listen to someone else preach. Listen and watch what other pastors and congregations are doing. It is one thing to hear about something being done in a church service or in a church’s various ministries. It is another thing to see it being done.

Pray and study. Find a good Bible study that is good for you and your wife. This Bible study is for you and your wife. It is not for anyone else. It is not for future sermon preparation. It is for you to be reminded that we abide in Christ. John 15:4 “Abide in Me, and I in you, as the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.” The Bible study is for you to get to know your Lord better.

Take a vacation. During your sabbatical take two or three weeks and take a real vacation. Do something fun. It does not have to be anything related to ministry. In fact it should not be related to ministry. What is fun and relaxing for you? Do that.

Enjoy a hobby. Do you have a realistic hobby? By realistic, is it affordable and during your regular life it must not take up enough time to be detrimental to your family life and ministry. It is good to briefly and regularly enjoy something just to enjoy something you find fun to do. As examples I like walking and shooting. During my sabbatical I discovered that air guns are an affordable and convenient way to enjoy shooting. That is me. What is fun for you?

What did I learn about myself when I took a sabbatical?

I did not learn anything new. I 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). 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 belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shod my feet with the preparation of the Gospel, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God. I was reminded that Paul, in Ephesians 6:11, wrote “put on the whole armor of God.” I was reminded that I had not put it on. I chose not to put it on and I suffered the consequences of that decision. God tells us to put it on he does not put it on us. We have a choice to make.

What did I learn about leading a church?

Do not try to do everything yourself. In truth I already knew that. I needed to be reminded of it and I was reminded of it. As the pastor my priority must start with prayer and the ministry of the word. There is no formula for this, or if there is I have not discovered it. Every congregation is a snowflake in that they are all different.

Visiting sister churches in South Dakota reminded me of these things. Recruit church members to help with the ministry, but if you cannot find someone right away for a particular ministry wait on God. Do not talk someone into doing something they are not called to do, instead start with prayer and the ministry of the word and wait for God if you need to wait.

Visiting sister churches also reminded me that a given church cannot do every ministry needed in a community. Instead look for the ministry that the church can do well and do that. This goes back to praying for wisdom.

How would I advise someone wanting to take a sabbatical?

It is possible for a bi-vocational pastor to take a sabbatical. In most cases you will take a sabbatical from your office as pastor and you will continue to work at your secular job. The Dakota Baptist Convention has resources to help with the expenses related to a sabbatical, such as money for pulpit supply and travel expenses. In South Dakota and North Dakota you will have to drive for hours to visit our sister churches.

If you are reading this and think you would benefit from a sabbatical do these things:

First and last pray about it.

If you are a part of the Dakota Baptist Convention, Contact Dr. Fred MacDonald or one of our Church Relations Missionaries and ask about the assistance that is available for taking a sabbatical.

Contact the leadership of the association to which your church belongs. Ask them about the assistance that is available for taking a sabbatical.

Talk to the lay leadership of your church about taking a sabbatical. Ask their advice and listen to them.

Write up a formal proposal and present it of the lay leadership of the church and get their support.

After doing these things take the proposal for a sabbatical and present it of the congregation for them to consider and vote on.

If you would like to talk to me about a sabbatical please give me a call or email me.

Will Page, Pastor First Baptist Church of Miller, South Dakota (701-609-0196,
pastorwill.fbcmiller@gmail.com)