

Get the Most From Your Sabbatical

Recently, our church gave my wife and I the gift of an eight week sabbatical. It exceeded my expectations — by a long shot.

My last sabbatical was devoted to writing a dissertation. Thankfully, this one was quite a bit different!

While the nature of sabbaticals range anywhere from a specific work product to personal rest and renewal, I'd like to think with you for a moment about ways to intentionally front-load renewal into the core of what you do regardless of the ultimate desired outcome.

Leading up to the sabbatical, I met with Dr. Archibald Hart, Senior Professor and Dean Emeritus at the School of Psychology at Fuller Seminary who is an author and expert on stress and burnout. His counsel to me was invaluable in designing a sabbatical season that was incredibly beneficial.

With a prayer that my experience can be of value to you and the staff you lead, here's a beginning checklist of ideas for maximizing a time of sabbatical.

- Receive your time away as a gift. While your church may have a provision or policy that allows you to have a sabbatical every 5-8 years, receive the time away not as an 'entitlement', but as a gift. This sets your heart and attitude in a place of gratitude and appreciation and receptivity.
- Disconnect totally. Initially, I planned to phone in to the church each week to keep updated and speak into decisions, but I was strongly (and wisely) counseled not to. Simply put, your mind and soul need the benefit of a complete change of pace. Say it with me: "No phone calls and no emails".
- Get distracted. Get out of town. Don't stay at home; home is full of routines and temptations to just do the same thing. We spent 80% of our eight weeks on the road at nine different locations—with thanks to a few retreat centers and to friends who so graciously shared their vacation condos with us!
- Start each day with a prayer of expectation. For us, it was "God, how will you speak to us today?" And to that end, we endeavored to create as many "input streams" as possible: reading Scripture and books on the spiritual life, attending worship services (we went to a different church each weekend—with no responsibilities!), meeting with friends who enrich us and walk with us.
- Look for "memorial moments". Anticipate times when God will dramatically meet you. One of my memorial moments happened during a time of solitude on the bluff of Crystal Cove beach. I took several stones, each representing a loss or disappointment that I had experienced as a result of a recent and difficult chapter of ministry. I then tossed them one by one into the ocean symbolically releasing them. It was a powerful moment.
- Drink deeply of the beauty of God's creation. Spiritual batteries recharge best when you surround and soak in the sights and sounds and smells of our Creator's craftsmanship. Whenever I would take time for some reading, I would set up shop in the most scenic setting possible (in a garden; overlooking a lake; a quiet spot of a restaurant's patio).
- Journal. I'm sure you would agree that writing down your thoughts during a sabbatical is a no-brainer.

But let me add something for your consideration. At certain times you will have an epiphany. The fog will lift and you will have unusual clarity. Capture that in writing. And then over the next several days, test it. Was that a word from the Lord? Does it still resonate deep in your soul? If so, it's a keeper.

- **Work out.** Ramp up your physical exercise. The body, mind and spirit work together. Some of my best thoughts came on a long run as my mind and spirit were released (and those wonderful endorphins kicked in!).
- **Do some things you can't normally do.** What are those things that you always wanted to do but that the life and schedule of a pastor prohibits? For me that was running the Redondo Beach Super Bowl 10K with my son and his wife on a Sunday morning (and they even waited patiently for me at the finish line!).
- **Check in on your calling.** For my part, no sabbatical is complete without an intentional rehearsal of God's unique calling on your life. What has He uniquely designed you to be and to do? What are those things that you do exceptionally (and automatically) well? And how closely aligned are you with them?
- **Capture how you will be different as your return.** Sabbaticals don't happen all that often and as such they should stand out in the landscape of your life as defining moments. What did you learn about God and yourself that is life-altering. How will you be different? And what is your plan to see this sustained? For me, I've created a 'scorecard' listing 15 items of how by God's grace I want and intend to be different. At the end of each day, I review that list to note progress and mid-course correction.

You take it from here. Add your own signature to your sabbatical. It could very well be the most important chapter in your life and ministry.