

# I Was Forced to Take a Sabbatical

*Why pastors need sabbaticals and what the Bible has to say*

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I have been in ministry now for more than 40 years as a missionary, pastor, and for the last 11 years, as associate superintendent in the **Eastern District** of the EFCA. In all that time, I had never taken a sabbatical. While the EFCA does not have any hard-and-fast rules regarding sabbaticals, several districts recommend that churches grant those in pastoral ministry a sabbatical every five to ten years.

Last summer, our superintendent and board for the Eastern District Association realized that I had never been offered a sabbatical and determined that I should start planning one for early 2018. This was a wonderful gift.

As we discussed my sabbatical with the superintendent and board, we realized that this would not just be good for me but also set a good example for our churches. It is deeply beneficial to give those in pastoral ministry time to rest and return with

renewed zeal. For months, I thought about what I wanted to accomplish during my sabbatical and researched places to go.

## Finding myself flat on my back was a way for God to get me out of autopilot and pay attention to Him again.

TWEET

And then, in the fall, just several months after my sabbatical planning was beginning to take shape, I tripped over a mulching bag while mowing one last time before winter. I fell head first into the driveway, resulting in a broken rib, a gash in my head requiring stitches, a concussion and several weeks being laid up in recovery. In my years of busyness in ministry, finding myself flat on my back was a way for God to get me out of autopilot and pay attention to Him again. Talk about a forced sabbatical.

After my recovery, I finalized plans to then take an unforced—but still much-needed—sabbatical from district ministry for three months. This was a time to rest, renew my relationship with God and family, reflect on the last 40 years of ministry, recharge the batteries and then rev the engines for the next season of ministry.

At first, as my sabbatical commenced, I felt guilty. I wondered, “What am I going to do with myself?” But that need to *do* soon faded as I began to *be*. I took naps. I went for walks. For one week, I went on a self-guided silent retreat at a Jesuit Retreat Center in Wernersville, Pennsylvania, where I reflectively prayed. I spent extended time in my Bible. I followed the contemplative daily readings laid out in the book ***Daily Office: Remembering God’s Presence Throughout the Day*** by Peter Scazzero. I sat in silence before the Lord, allowing Him to speak into my soul and capture my heart. I journaled what I was thinking about. I slowly, deliberately read a book called ***The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul by Restoring Sabbath*** by Mark Buchanan. Especially meaningful were the Sabbath liturgies at the end of each chapter.

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Finally, for three weeks, my wife, Karen, and I got away to South Florida, where we enjoyed an unhurried life, eating, sleeping, exploring the Everglades and staring at the ocean. Together we worked through ***How We Love: Discover Your Love Style, Enhance Your Marriage***, by Milan and Kay Yerkovich, to strengthen our communication patterns. Karen especially was thankful for the gift of me taking three actual weeks just to be with her. My three-month sabbatical was deliberately planned out and joyously lived out. It was good. Very good.

# Why take a sabbatical?

While elder boards increasingly see the value in their pastors taking a sabbatical break, some may wonder why a pastor needs extra time away when others in the church do not get that.

The reason is that pastors are on front-line duty 24/7, with spiritual targets on their backs. Over time, a church leader can become physically, emotionally and spiritually drained and in need of a break.

It's important to remember that a sabbatical is not simply a few extra weeks of vacation. In a thoughtfully planned sabbatical, a pastor is given an extended time of paid leave in which he can hit the pause button, take a step back and just be with God to decompress, renew his spirit and come back ready to lead.

The real question becomes: Why *not* take a sabbatical? Every church wants a healthy pastor. Every elder board should encourage their pastor to take a sabbatical and help him devote the time needed to plan out a well-organized reprieve that allows for his family to rest and for the pastor to return, refreshed as the leader God intends for the church.

## What does the Bible say about sabbaticals?

Several passages of Scripture help us sort out a sabbatical, and some speak poignantly to those in the role of pastor.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul” (Psalm 23:1-2, ESV).

During sabbaticals, pastors no longer actively act as the shepherd. They sit under the Great Shepherd, waiting for their own soul to be nourished. When a pastor's soul is frayed around the edges, soul restoration will come in submission to the Lord as our Shepherd, lying down and being still in His presence.

“The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land that I give you, the land shall keep a Sabbath to the Lord. For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its fruits, but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to the Lord’ (Leviticus 25:1-5, ESV).

This Old Testament Sabbath year was not only a rest for the land, but also a rest from work for the farmer. For ministry leaders, sabbaticals are meant to be a solemn rest where you pause your work and begin replenishing your soul. Many congregations derive the timing of sabbaticals (one in seven years) from this passage.

“For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, ‘In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be your strength.’ But you were unwilling, and you said, ‘No! We will flee upon horses’... and, ‘We will ride upon swift steeds’; therefore your

pursuers shall be swift. ... Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him” (Isaiah 30:15, 17, ESV).

Isaiah shares an interesting take on rest: To apply it to those in “professional” ministry roles, we can all get too easily caught up in the frantic race of ministry busyness. Often, many of us, myself included, can resist the invitation from God to rest. But God offers all of us His rest. We need to ask: Am I willing to take a break from all of this busy work and just sit at God’s feet for a while and allow Him to feed me? Full-time ministry can be hectic and gut-wrenching. We all need to spend time daily waiting for the Lord.

Most pastors and ministry leaders will need no convincing about the importance of a sabbatical break. But in the heat of serving, day in and day out, they might need to be reminded that it is OK to pause and rest each week. As a pastor to pastors, let me encourage you: Do not neglect your soul by ignoring the Sabbath rest. And if available, I urge fellow pastors to take a sabbatical when you still have years of ministry ahead of you.

## Planning your sabbatical

If a sabbatical has been on your mind, give yourself at least six months to a year to get approval for a sabbatical, map out your sabbatical goals, look for creative ways to pay for this time and make your plans.

Discuss your ideas, goals and plans with your spouse so decisions are mutually acceptable. Once the elder board has approved your sabbatical, talk through the timing and plans for coverage with your elder board. Who will find speakers to preach in your place? Who will answer phone calls? What if there is an emergency? Who will have access to your phone number?

If your board is not convinced, there are excellent studies on the longevity of healthy pastors versus those who are struggling, as well as studies on how a sabbatical can improve the health of the pastor (see the reading list below). It could also be beneficial to invite a district leader to talk to the board.

Wherever you are in the process, I hope these resources can be helpful as you begin to prayerfully consider and plan for a time of rest and renewal with God.

## Resources for sabbatical planning

- For those in pastoral ministry, the Lilly Endowment **offers scholarships** up to \$50,000 to defray the costs of a sabbatical.
- Consider taking up to two weeks of your sabbatical on the **Trinity International University** campus. **Contact Carl Johnson**, special assistant to the president for Church and Community Relations, for more information.



- Read the article “**Renewal Time: Planning Your Sabbatical**,” by Drexel C. Rankin.
- Read the book ***For God’s Sake, Rest!*** by James L. Anderson.

## Resources for understanding the need for a sabbatical

- Read the book ***Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving***, by Bob Burns, Tasha D. Chapman and Donald C. Guthrie, or read an excerpt from this book published in *EFCA Today*, “**How Can We Help Pastors Thrive?**”
- Read the book ***The Emotionally Healthy Leader***, by Peter Scazzero.
- Read the article “**5 Reasons Your Pastor Should Take a Sabbatical**,” by Thom Rainer.

*Have you taken a sabbatical? How do you practice and preserve rest while you minister to your church? Share your experience in the comments.*

### Peter Johnson

Peter Johnson served as associate superintendent of the Eastern District Association for 11 years. He previously served as pastor at two different EFCA churches before joining the EDA in 2007. He and his wife are looking forward to their next season of ministry.

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