

Special Message for Grace Chapel

Family and Friends of Grace Chapel, I trust and hope this finds you well.

This note is to communicate something unusual yet important. You may remember my mentioning this at our Annual Business Meeting; I will be taking my first sabbatical, this summer, from mid-June through mid-September. This means I will be away and unavailable for ministry and work during this time.

There are many reasons for my sharing this with you. Primarily because questions arise when something out of the ordinary happens at a church- especially involving the Pastor! I find it best to just get those things addressed and clarified up front.

Questions like...

- *What's a sabbatical?
- *Why is he leaving for so long?
- *Is something wrong with him?
- *Is he leaving the church and/or interviewing for other jobs?
- *Is something wrong at the church?
- *Is the Board forcing him to take the time away?
- *Is he and his marriage/family ok?

These might be some of the things on your mind. Let's be honest friends, it does appear a bit out-of-the-ordinary for a pastor to be away so long, and it's certainly normal for people to ask questions. So, in the spirit of transparency, I prefer the direct approach as to not leave you to your own curiosities! Here are some answers to those questions...

*A sabbatical is the common practice of extended unplugging and disconnecting from work- usually, but not limited to, those working in higher-education, psychology, counseling and clergy.

*Sabbaticals are encouraged every 7 years of service and typically range in length of 3-6 months, with older traditions suggesting sabbatical for one full year. This will be my first sabbatical in over 12 years of service at Grace.

*My sabbatical has been in the works for over two years. I always intended it to be a 3-month long sabbatical. I was supposed to take it in 2020, but the need for me to be present during the covid season took priority.

*Nothing is wrong. I am gratefully serving as your Pastor. The Staff, Board and I are in harmony with each other. In fact, they have been huge supporters and encouragers of this time and the timing of it.

*I am not leaving Grace Chapel. Cindy and I believe that God still has a work for us here. He has given us a voice to speak to this time and season in the life of our church and still has valid use of us for the needs of people we live and serve among.

*I am not interviewing for jobs, nor am I looking or seeking for jobs. My eyes, heart and intentions are on Grace Chapel.

*Nothing is wrong with the church. In fact, the opposite is true! I am blessed by how God is moving among us. The depth, growth and life we are experiencing are actually the things that gave me further hesitation and pause about taking the time away. But I am thankful that the Board and key leaders here at Grace are strongly urging me to take this most important time to rest, reset and rejuvenate.

*The Board is not forcing anything. As mentioned, they are strongly supportive and encouraging me to do this. I am deeply thankful that I can leave with total confidence in our Staff and Board to keep the ministry of Grace flowing without interruption during this time. You will have plenty of contact-points for your needs while I am away.

*My marriage and family have never been better. Cindy will be joining me for some of the time away. My time will be split here at home as well as traveling. Due to her own job, Cindy will join me as she can. You will see less of her at Grace during this time, but she will be present occasionally. My kids and their families will be at Grace and connected as usual.

*This sabbatical is a unique and special time for me to simply exhale. There is a unique dynamic to working in the service of people (ie: counseling, psychology, teaching, etc.) and an even more unique dynamic in pastoring. Please don't take this as a complaint nor in a negative manner, but truthfully speaking, my batteries are drained and I find myself at the shallow end of creativity and personal stamina. This time away will allow me to recharge emotionally, physically and spiritually. I want to be a source of inspiration and life for you, as my calling in Jesus needs me to be. I am seeking this time to aid and contribute to me being the healthiest I can be for you, my family and myself.

***Below are excerpts from a qualified "pastor of pastors" who deals with pastoral needs and training regarding what a sabbatical is, isn't and its value. Please read at your leisure for further education and understanding.*

Please feel free to contact me or the Board with any questions or needs for clarity regarding this issue.

Many blessings and thanks,

Pastor James

(These portions were taken from “*A Sabbatical Guide for Pastors*” by Bill Gaultiere)

What is a Sabbatical?

I’ve worked with lots of pastors and leaders from diverse Christian traditions. Most don’t understand the heart of a Sabbatical. Their church members or ministry partners especially don’t understand the spirit of a Biblical Sabbatical.

A Sabbatical is not just a long vacation. It’s not a time to read books on leadership or visit successful churches to learn from them. It’s not a time to write a book, do research, or work on some other special project. These are good things to do and it’s not that you *can’t* do any of them on a Sabbatical, but they work against the spirit of Biblical Sabbath rest.

Also, a Sabbatical is not a job search and it’s not an elder imposed leave of absence to discipline a pastor. When these activities are done in the name of “Sabbatical” it breaks down the trust of church attenders.

The Biblical precedent and Christian tradition is for pastors to go on Sabbatical once every seven years. Typical Sabbaticals today are from one to six months long, with three being a standard.

A true Sabbatical is a season of Sabbath for *prolonged rest*. It’s like stringing together a number of Sabbath days. It’s an extended time in which you do no work. You do no pastoring, no leading, no ministering, no visioning the future of the church, no sermon planning. You don’t try to accomplish anything big. You just “do nothing”!

Yes, *nothing!* Of course, we don’t do nothing as an end in itself — that’d be an empty legalism — our purpose is to worship our Creator and Redeemer (like the Bible teaches in the Sabbath commands of Exodus and Deuteronomy). The key to Sabbath rest is: “Do nothing! Don’t try to make anything happen!” *Just be with God.*

But most of us in Christian leadership can’t rest and BE that freely.

Eventually, after your body stops jittering, after your thoughts stop flitting about, after you start feeling your emotions, after your ideal self that performs and pleases is dismantled, after you experience your nothingness and nakedness before God, after you experience unconditional love, *then* you can hopefully begin to really rest in your body and soul.

We’re putting the words of Psalm 23 to the test; “*He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.*”

I tell pastors, including all kinds of men and women in ministry, that to help you do nothing you need to do *something*; using some spiritual practices as “somethings” that can help you to relax in God’s sovereignty and care. Even if you feel led of the Lord to have a project focus to your Sabbatical, give strong consideration to devoting the first third or more of your time away with resting in God’s lovingkindness and mixing into your project other extended times for prayer and soul care.

Why Do Pastors Need Sabbaticals?

I can state without wavering that the single greatest need of the church today is the restoration of ministers. What is required is a quite different approach to their life and work. It is a matter of leading them into a massive shift of the dynamics of their personality under God, and one that cannot be done by more books and conferences. They need to be taken out of the circulation for a sufficiently long time to re-vision and re-structure their lives in communion with Jesus and his kingdom.

While some pastors and other Christian workers are afraid to step aside from their church or ministry for a Sabbatical, most would like to do this if given the opportunity! But Elder Boards, congregation members, and donors often don’t understand the need for a Sabbatical. Most of them are coming from the business world where they feel fortunate to get four weeks of vacation a year. And yet today many secular companies (like Nike and Google) offer Sabbaticals for their long-term employees!

Pastoral work is extremely stressful. A lack of spiritual rest is especially hazardous to the effectiveness of pastoral ministry!

It’s very difficult for pastors and leaders to say *no* to the needs of the people they care for and to the unending opportunities to do God’s work and grow their church or ministry. But if they don’t care for their own souls under God, respecting their personal limits and nurturing their own relationships with God and their family, then their ministry eventually collapses.

Of course, people in other jobs work extremely hard and have great stress too. But as an example, if doctors, attorneys, teachers, or other professionals go through a divorce they usually don’t lose their jobs! If their spiritual life grows stale probably no one worries about it. If they struggle with pornography, alcohol abuse, or other emotional problems it’s usually no problem for their work life — or if it gets in the way then once they get help they can go right back to work.

But pastors and missionaries are called to a higher standard. Rightly so! Their work is sacred. They minister the Word of God to their congregations. They baptize new Christians. They marry the bride and groom. They conduct funerals. They care for hurting marriages and families. They help people who feel far from God get re-connected.

More than any other workers pastors are Christ’s ambassadors to hundreds or thousands of people. We need our pastors to be morally fit and spiritually healthy! Their message needs to match their character or people won’t follow them.

Pastor Stress Statistics Document Their Need for Sabbaticals

Many research studies show that pastoral work is acutely stressful, draining, and dangerous for pastors and their families.

Here are a few of the *Pastor Stress Statistics*:

- 90% work 55 to 75 hours per week
- 90% feel fatigued and worn out every week
- 91% have experienced some form of burn out
- 70% have a lower self-esteem then when they entered the ministry
- 70% fight depression
- The average seminary trained pastor lasts five years in professional ministry

When pastors are over-stressed, their marriages and families suffer too:

- 80% feel unappreciated and left out and unappreciated by church members
- 80% feel pressured to serve in ways that do not fit their gifts
- Over 50% say that the most destructive event in their marriage and family was the day they entered the ministry
- 80% wish their spouse would choose another profession

Pastors get so preoccupied caring for others that their own souls suffer:

- 72% only study the Bible when preparing their sermons for others
- 70% do not have a close friend
- 50% do not regularly meet with an accountability partner or group
- 44% do not regularly take a day off
- 85% have never taken a Sabbatical!

Church elder boards and Christian ministry/mission organizations need to see these statistics and realize the risk of their pastors and other ministry leaders burning out. A sabbatical is an insurance policy for pastor wellness and leadership health.