PLANNING A MEANINGFUL PASTORAL SABBATICAL

The Pastor's Personal Companion

A Private Guide for Discernment, Renewal, and Re-entry

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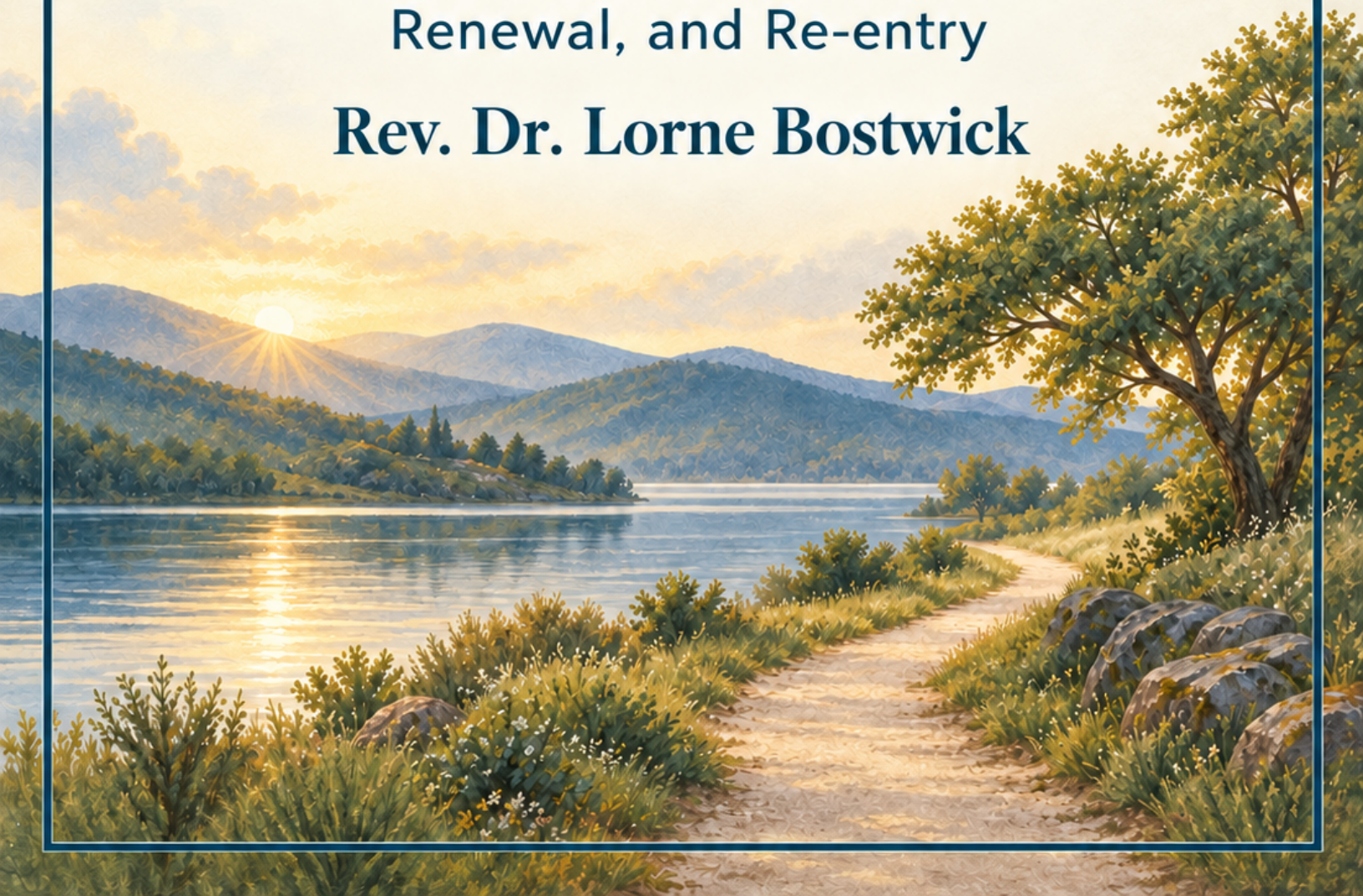

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Beginning Here

This Companion Belongs to You

This Companion is yours.

Unlike **Planning a Meaningful Pastoral Sabbatical: A Shared Working Guide for Pastors and Congregations**, it is not a document for the Sabbatical Team, governing body, personnel committee, congregation, or denominational leaders.

You do not have to turn it in.

You do not have to explain your answers.

You do not have to share anything you write here unless you decide that sharing it would be helpful.

That distinction matters.

Your congregation needs enough information to support your sabbatical well. It needs to know when you will be gone, what the sabbatical may cost, what kinds of experiences you hope to pursue, what responsibilities need coverage, what boundaries will protect the separation, and how you will return.

But your congregation does not need access to everything happening within you.

Some of the most important questions of sabbatical are personal.

What has been wearing you down?

What do you miss?

What still gives you joy?

What have you stopped noticing?

What have you been carrying for too long?

What do you long to do when nobody needs anything from you?

What parts of yourself have received too little attention because pastoral responsibility has occupied so much space?

What might God be inviting you to notice?

You may know some of the answers already.

You may discover that you do not.

Either is a good place to begin.

This Companion is not designed to produce the correct sabbatical. It is meant to help you become curious about what renewal might mean for you.

How to Use This Companion

Do not feel obligated to work through this Companion from beginning to end.

Some sections will matter more than others. Some questions may immediately open something important. Others may have nothing to say to you.

Pass them by.

Write if writing helps.

Take a question on a walk.

Pray with it.

Talk about it with your spouse or partner, a friend, spiritual director, therapist, coach, or someone else you trust.

Sit with it without answering.

Return later.

Cross something out.

Change your mind.

You are not creating a permanent record of who you are. You are noticing where you are now.

One caution may be especially important for pastors:

Do not turn this Companion into work.

You have probably spent years learning how to complete things responsibly. You prepare sermons. You answer email. You attend meetings. You finish reports. You care for people. You solve problems.

There is no prize for completing every page of this Companion.

Leave some blank.

Perhaps many.

The blank spaces may be doing their own work.

The Movements of the Companion

This Companion follows the broad journey of sabbatical:

BEFORE → RELEASE → RECEIVE → NOTICE → RETURN → INTEGRATE

Before sabbatical, you will listen for what you need.

As departure approaches, you will practice releasing responsibility.

During sabbatical, this Companion becomes quieter and invites you primarily to notice.

As return approaches, it helps you attend to what has happened without requiring you to explain it too quickly.

After returning, it helps you notice what you want to carry forward and what conversations may need to begin.

Part One — Before You Plan Too Much

1. Start With Where You Are

Before asking what you want to do on sabbatical, notice the life from which you are leaving.

Not what you think you ought to feel.

Not whether you have earned a sabbatical.

Not whether other pastors work harder.

Not whether your congregation has been especially difficult or especially wonderful.

Just notice.

Right now, ministry feels…

Right now, life outside ministry feels…

When I imagine several months away from pastoral responsibility, my first response is…

Perhaps it is relief.

Perhaps excitement.

Perhaps anxiety.

Perhaps guilt.

Perhaps you cannot imagine what you would do.

Perhaps the idea itself makes you tired.

Perhaps you have been dreaming about it for years.

Notice the response without judging it.

It is information.

2. What Has Been Wearing You Down?

Pastoral depletion does not always announce itself dramatically.

Sometimes it accumulates.

A little less patience.

A little less curiosity.
A little more irritation.
Another difficult conversation.
Another funeral.
Another staff problem.
Another Sunday that arrives remarkably soon after the previous Sunday.
Another evening meeting.
Another person whose need is legitimate.
Another decision somebody expects you to make.
Sometimes nothing is terribly wrong.
There has simply been a great deal of ministry.

What has required the most from me recently?

What have I been carrying for a long time?

What am I tired of?

Where have I noticed myself becoming less patient, generous, curious, or present?

What do I keep doing because someone has to do it?

What feels heavier than it once did?

Do not immediately turn these answers into problems to solve.
For now, notice.

3. What Gives You Life?

Depletion is only part of the story.
Something still makes your heart rise.
Something interests you.
Something restores energy rather than consuming it.
Perhaps it happens in ministry.

Perhaps outside it.

When have I recently felt most alive?

What parts of ministry still give me energy?

What do I find myself looking forward to?

What makes me lose track of time?

Who brings out something good in me?

What makes me laugh?

What am I curious about even though it has no obvious usefulness?

That last question may deserve more attention than pastors usually give it.

Not everything valuable has to be useful.

4. What Have You Been Missing?

Long pastoral ministry can slowly narrow a life without anyone intending it.

There are only so many hours.

Something gets displaced.

Friendships.

Music.

Reading for pleasure.

Travel.

Physical activity.

Art.

Nature.

Cooking.

Making things.

Long conversations.
Solitude.
Play.
Intimacy.
Time with children, grandchildren, siblings, parents, or old friends.
Prayer that does not need to become a sermon.
Worship for which you are responsible for nothing.
Sleep.
Nothing.

Something I used to enjoy that has become difficult to make room for:

Someone I wish I saw more often:

Something I have wanted to learn:

Something I have wanted to try:

Something I would enjoy doing badly:

That may be important.
Pastors spend a great deal of life doing things in public where competence matters.
There is freedom in being a beginner.

5. What Does Your Body Know?

Your body may know something about your need for sabbatical before your mind does.
Notice what happens when you imagine different possibilities.
Imagine spending two weeks traveling intensely.
What happens in your body?
Imagine staying home for two weeks with almost nothing scheduled.
What happens?
Imagine being alone.
Imagine being with family.
Imagine hiking.

Imagine sitting beside water.

Imagine taking a class.

Imagine spending several days at a retreat center.

Imagine visiting old friends.

Imagine waking without an alarm and having nowhere you need to be.

What produces energy?

What produces resistance?

What produces relief?

My body seems to be asking for…

Do not make the body the sole authority.

But do not exclude it from the conversation.

Part Two — What Do You Long For?

6. Desire Is Not Selfishness

Pastors become practiced at asking what other people need.

What does the congregation need?

What does this family need?

What does the staff need?

What does the community need?

What does this sermon need?

What does God require of me?

Those are appropriate questions.

But sabbatical introduces another:

What do you desire?

Some pastors find that question surprisingly difficult.

Desire can feel indulgent.

It can also reveal something about where life is trying to return.

If nobody needed to approve my answer, I would love to…

If money were not the first consideration, I would be curious about…

If I did not need to explain how this would improve my ministry, I would like to…

Something beautiful I would like to experience:

Something playful I would like to do:

Somewhere I would like to linger:

Someone I would like to spend unhurried time with:

You do not have to do any of these things.

Desire is not yet a plan.
Let yourself want something before deciding whether it is practical.

7. What Kind of Rest Do You Need?

Rest is not one thing.
Sometimes the body needs sleep.
Sometimes the mind needs freedom from decisions.
Sometimes the spirit needs silence.
Sometimes the self needs anonymity.
Sometimes we need laughter, movement, beauty, companionship, or adventure.
Sometimes what restores one person would exhaust another.

I feel physically restored by...

Mentally restored by...

Emotionally restored by...

Spiritually restored by...

Relationally restored by...

Playfully restored by...

Something I call "rest" that does not actually restore me:

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8. What Kind of Rhythm Might You Need?

Before you make an itinerary, imagine a rhythm.
Do you want long stretches in one place?
Movement?
A quiet beginning?

Travel followed by recovery?

Periods alone balanced with family?

A retreat near the beginning?

One near the end?

Do you want the sabbatical to begin with almost nothing?

The beginning of my sabbatical might need...

The middle might have room for...

Toward the end, I may need...

Do not build the calendar yet.

Listen for rhythm first.

9. Making Room Financially

Eventually sabbatical dreams meet numbers.

That does not have to diminish the dreaming.

In fact, financial preparation several years ahead may give you considerably more freedom when sabbatical arrives.

Your congregation has financial work of its own. It may need to accumulate money for pulpit supply, pastoral coverage, additional staff responsibilities, congregational renewal, and other costs created by your absence.

You have a different question:

What financial resources would give me freedom to shape a sabbatical around what would actually be renewing?

You may receive a grant that substantially expands what is possible.

Apply for it.

But do not build a sabbatical that depends entirely upon receiving it.

Begin With What You Hope Might Be Possible

You do not need an itinerary yet.

Think broadly.

Would you like to travel?

Take a class?

Spend time at a retreat center?

Rent a cabin?

Visit family?

Include your spouse or partner, children, or grandchildren in part of the experience?

Attend a conference?

Purchase books?

Explore a place connected with something you want to learn?

Do something recreational that ordinarily feels financially out of reach?

If financial constraints were not the first consideration, I would like to make room for…

Which possibilities matter most to me?

Which would be wonderful but are not essential to a meaningful sabbatical?

That distinction may become important later.

Look for Grants Early

Do not wait until the sabbatical year to investigate grants.

Grant programs have eligibility requirements, application schedules, planning expectations, and deadlines. Some require substantial preparation by both pastor and congregation.

The Lilly Endowment clergy renewal programs have been especially influential in encouraging congregations to understand pastoral renewal as something more than extended vacation. If you are eligible, investigate the current program carefully and early.

Do not plan from what a previous recipient remembers. Programs, requirements, deadlines, and funding change.

Also look beyond Lilly.

Investigate possibilities through your denomination, presbytery or other regional body, benefits organization, seminary, foundations, continuing-education programs, and other organizations supporting clergy renewal.

Grants and Funding I Want to Investigate

Source	Possible Amount	Deadline	What It Might Support	Next Step
Lilly Endowment clergy renewal opportunity				
Denominational or regional				
Seminary or educational				
Foundation				
Other				

Keep one sentence in front of you while applying:

A grant can enlarge my sabbatical. It does not have to create it.

What If I Don't Receive the Grant?

Ask that question now, not after receiving a disappointing letter.

Imagine two versions of the sabbatical.

My Grant-Supported Sabbatical Might Include:

My Meaningful Sabbatical Without a Grant Could Include:

What Would I Protect in Either Version?

That answer may tell you more about what you need than the larger itinerary does.

What Resources Do I Already Have?

Before deciding how much you need to save, look at what may already be available.

Do your terms of call or employment agreement provide study leave or continuing-education funds?

Can unused funds accumulate?

Can study-leave time accumulate?

May accumulated resources appropriately be used for portions of sabbatical?

Could continuing-education resources support a class, books, conference, retreat, or other educational component, leaving other sabbatical funds available for different purposes?

Do not assume.

Terms of call, employment policies, denominational requirements, and financial or tax rules differ. Find out what is actually permitted before building those resources into the plan.

Resources I May Already Have

Study or continuing-education funds available: $_____

Can funds accumulate? _____

Study-leave time available: _____

Can time accumulate? _____

Other professional-development resources: _____

Other resources: _____

Questions I need answered:

What Do I Want to Save?

Several years can turn a relatively modest monthly amount into meaningful freedom.

Start with a target rather than simply deciding to "save something."

Years until anticipated sabbatical: _____

Personal sabbatical savings target: $_____

Already saved: $_____

Remaining goal: $_____

Annual amount needed: $_____

Monthly amount needed: $_____

Now look at the number.

Does it seem realistic?

If not, change something.

Change the target.

Extend the savings period.

Simplify the hoped-for experience.

Seek additional funding.

Or combine several approaches.

The purpose of preparing financially for renewal is not to create years of financial pressure before you get there.

How Do I Want to Save?

There is no single right mechanism.

You might establish personal savings specifically for sabbatical and arrange automatic transfers.

Depending upon how far away sabbatical is and your own financial circumstances, you might consider a savings account, certificate of deposit, or another appropriate savings or investment vehicle.

You might ask whether the congregation would consider matching some portion of your personal sabbatical saving.

You might explore whether there is an appropriate formal arrangement through which money associated with your compensation or professional-development benefits can be designated for future sabbatical use.

But do not improvise financial arrangements involving compensation, church-held funds, or tax treatment. Before establishing an arrangement in which the church retains or administers money that would otherwise be compensation, obtain appropriate financial, payroll, tax, and denominational guidance.

The question for now is simpler:

What savings arrangement would make it most likely that I will actually prepare?

What do I need to investigate before choosing it?

Whose financial or tax advice might I need?

Would I Like to Ask the Congregation to Participate?

There may be possibilities worth discussing.

Would the congregation consider matching some portion of your personal sabbatical savings?

Could eligible continuing-education resources be accumulated for appropriate sabbatical purposes?

Could the congregation increase its own contribution as the sabbatical approaches?

Are there other arrangements that would encourage both pastor and congregation to prepare over several years?

These are possibilities for conversation, not expectations.

Something I might want to propose:

Why I think it could help:

What I need to know before proposing it:

What Does This Mean for My Family?

Personal sabbatical saving does not happen in isolation.

Money directed toward sabbatical is money not being used for something else.

A spouse or partner should not discover that a substantial family financial commitment has been made in the name of the pastor's renewal.

Nor should an elaborate sabbatical create financial strain that follows the family home.

Talk about it.

What can we reasonably devote to sabbatical without creating hardship or resentment?

Are there experiences we want to save for together?

What other family financial priorities need to remain protected?

If a grant does not come through, what are we comfortable spending?

What would make the sabbatical feel financially irresponsible to us?

That last question can establish an important boundary.

Build the Sabbatical You Can Have

Eventually, put the pieces together.

Possible Resource	Amount	Confirmed?
Personal savings		
Congregational contribution to pastor renewal		
Eligible study/continuing-education resources		
Grant funding		
Other funding		
Total		

The sabbatical I can reasonably fund without a grant: $_____

Additional amount I hope grants might provide: $_____

Maximum my family and I are comfortable personally contributing: $_____

Those numbers create a boundary around the dreaming.

Money should serve the sabbatical rather than define its meaning.

A grant may let you cross an ocean.

Without one, you may drive to a cabin beside a lake.

One pastor may study in Rome. Another may read in the public library, hike every afternoon, visit old friends, and spend two weeks camping with family.

The more expensive sabbatical is not necessarily the more renewing one.

Financial planning simply gives you more freedom to choose intentionally rather than discovering, shortly before departure, that financial circumstances have already made the choices for you.

Part Three — Relationships

10. Who Else Has Been Living Your Ministry?

Pastoral ministry belongs to the pastor in a particular way.

But its demands are rarely carried by the pastor alone.

Spouses and partners experience interrupted meals, changed plans, evening meetings, Christmas responsibilities, Sunday schedules, pastoral emergencies, public expectations, and the peculiar reality that people they barely know may know intimate things about the pastor's life.

Children experience ministry too.

So do friendships.

Sabbatical may create opportunities for relationships that have spent years accommodating pastoral vocation.

Who has made room for my ministry?

Where has my vocation cost someone I love something?

This is not an invitation to guilt.

It is an invitation to gratitude and attention.

Is there something we would enjoy receiving from this sabbatical together?

Is there someone I need to ask rather than assume?

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11. Who Are You When You Are Not the Pastor?

You do not stop being an ordained person because you go on sabbatical.

Nor should you have to pretend your call is merely a job you can set aside like a briefcase.

Pastoral vocation can become deeply woven into identity.

But vocation is not the whole of a human life.

Who are you when nobody is asking you to lead?

When nobody introduces you as Pastor?

When you are not responsible for the room?

Outside pastoral ministry, I am…

People who know me primarily as myself rather than as pastor:

Parts of myself that receive too little room:

Something about myself I would enjoy rediscovering:

You do not need to solve the relationship between identity and vocation.

Just make room for more of yourself to be present.

Part Four — Your Life With God

12. When Prayer Has Become Part of the Job

Pastors pray.
And pastors lead prayer.
Those are not always the same experience.
You pray at bedsides, meetings, meals, funerals, weddings, worship services, retreats, and committee gatherings.
You study Scripture partly because Sunday is coming.
You may find yourself reading a biblical text and almost immediately wondering what could be preached from it.
Sabbatical may provide space to encounter God without needing to make the encounter useful to anyone else.

My prayer life right now feels…

Scripture feels…

Worship feels…

Something I miss in my life with God:

Something that still feels alive:

Do not design a spiritual-improvement program unless that is genuinely what gives you life.
You do not need to become better at prayer during sabbatical.
You may simply need room to inhabit the relationship differently.

13. Let Prayer Become Larger

Prayer does not have to be confined to moments when you stop living in order to pray.
When beauty arrests you, attend to it.
When gratitude rises, receive it.
When grief appears, do not rush past it.
When compassion is stirred, notice.
When anger at injustice awakens, listen.

When you make something beautiful, care for the earth, feed someone, allow yourself to be fed, forgive, resist what is death-dealing, rest, laugh, sing, swim, walk, or sit in silence, these experiences can become part of your lived dialogue with God.

Ask occasionally:

What has been given?

What is being awakened in me?

What response is asking to be made?

Sometimes the response will be words.

Sometimes not.

Let prayer become a way of inhabiting the relationship.

Part Five — Preparing to Leave

14. What Are You Afraid Will Happen Without You?

This question may be uncomfortable.

What are you worried about?

Who are you worried about?

What responsibility is hardest to release?

What do you suspect someone else will do differently?

What are you tempted to keep monitoring?

Now ask a different question:

What would it mean to trust them?

And perhaps the harder one:

What would it mean to trust God with a congregation I am accustomed to helping God care for?

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15. What If They Do Fine Without You?

There is another anxiety pastors do not always say aloud.

What if the congregation does wonderfully?

What if somebody else preaches well?

What if a lay leader discovers remarkable gifts?

What if staff make decisions without you?

What if people solve problems you have always solved?

What if they discover that some things do not need to return to you?

That may be one of the gifts of sabbatical.

Their competence does not diminish your call.

A healthy congregation becoming more capable is not evidence that you are less necessary.

It may be evidence that ministry is becoming more fully shared.

When I imagine the congregation thriving without me, I feel…

Stay with the answer for a while.

16. What Do You Need to Put Down?

Before leaving, name what you are relinquishing.

People I entrust to others:

Responsibilities I release:

Problems I cannot solve before leaving:

Decisions other people are allowed to make:

Things that may remain unfinished:

A prayer of release:

The congregation offers release.

Practice receiving it.

Then go.

Part Six — During the Sabbatical

17. You Do Not Need to Keep a Sabbatical Journal

You can.
But you do not have to.
Do not turn experience into documentation while you are still experiencing it.
Sometimes take the photograph.
Sometimes don’t.
Sometimes write.
Sometimes let the day disappear without preserving it.
You are allowed simply to live.

18. Notice What Gives Life

Occasionally—not every day—ask:
What has been giving me life?

What am I enjoying?

What am I surprised to be enjoying?

What am I doing less of?

What am I not missing?

What do I miss?

What am I curious about now?

You do not need to turn the answers into conclusions.

19. When the Plan Stops Serving You

You made a sabbatical plan before you knew what it would feel like to be on sabbatical.
Now you know more.
You may discover that the itinerary is too full.
Cancel something.
You may discover that you want more activity.
Add something.
Something you anticipated for years may disappoint you.
Let it be disappointing.
Something you did not expect may delight you.
Make room.

Something I want more of:

Something I want less of:

Something I am ready to release from the plan:

Something unexpected I want to follow:

The plan serves the renewal.
The renewal does not serve the plan.
At some point, sabbatical will begin to feel as though it is ending.
You may notice yourself thinking about the congregation again.
You may wonder what has happened while you were gone.
You may begin imagining what it will feel like to return.
Notice that too.
You do not have to begin returning before it is time.

Part Seven — As Sabbatical Begins to End

20. Do Not Interpret Everything Yet

Near the end of sabbatical, the mind may begin turning experience into conclusions.

What does this mean?

What should change?

What should I tell the congregation?

What should I preach?

What should I never do again?

Some conclusions may be clear.

Others need time.

Before deciding what the sabbatical means, remember what it gave you.

A moment I want to remember:

A place:

A person:

Something beautiful:

Something funny:

Something difficult:

Something I learned:

Something I rediscovered:

Something I received:

Something I am not yet ready to understand:

You do not have to make meaning out of everything before you go home.

21. What Are You Glad to Be Returning To?

Re-entry is not merely the end of freedom.

There may be things you genuinely love about the life to which you are returning.

People you miss.

Work that matters.

Worship you want to lead again.

A community that is yours.

A vocation you still love.

I am looking forward to...

People I am eager to see:

Something about ministry I have missed:

Something I feel grateful to return to:

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22. What Are You Reluctant to Return To?

Do not shame yourself for the answers.

I am not looking forward to...

Something I dread resuming:

A responsibility I hope does not simply return to me:

A pattern I do not want to recreate:

Something I need to talk about rather than silently resume:

These answers do not automatically become demands placed on the congregation.

They are material for discernment.

For now, that is enough.

Part Eight — Returning to Ministry

23. What Makes Your Heart Sing Now?

Once you have been back for a little while, another question may become possible.

Not simply:

What should I stop doing?

But:

What do I now know more clearly about the ministry I most want to give myself to?

Sabbatical may have reminded you of gifts that ordinary ministry had crowded toward the margins.

Teaching.

Pastoral care.

Preaching.

Community ministry.

Developing younger leaders.

Spiritual formation.

Writing.

Organizing.

Justice work.

Evangelism.

Administration.

Visiting.

Creating partnerships.

Building relationships beyond the congregation.

Or perhaps sabbatical simply renewed your affection for the work you were already doing.

The parts of ministry that make my heart sing are…

Gifts I would like to exercise more fully:

Responsibilities that consume disproportionate energy:

Things I have been doing that someone else may do better—or adequately enough:

Ministry I might have room to undertake if something else moved off my plate:

Perhaps nothing needs to change.

But if something you have noticed seems worth exploring, you may want to begin a conversation.

24. A Conversation Worth Initiating

The shared re-entry conversation in the Master Guide may already have given you useful information.

Others may have discovered gifts.

Responsibilities may have found new homes.

Something that once seemed necessarily pastoral may now be shared more naturally.

Let those shared discoveries inform this reflection.

The congregation may not know that you returned with new clarity about how you hope to inhabit your call.

You may need to initiate the conversation.

Not:

Here is my new job description.

But perhaps:

I learned something about myself during sabbatical that I would like us to explore together.

Some responsibilities might be redistributed.

Another staff member, board, committee, elder, deacon, or ministry team may have handled something well while you were gone.

Perhaps that responsibility does not need to come back to you.

Perhaps you can invest more deeply in areas where your particular gifts are most fruitful.

Perhaps new ministry becomes possible—community engagement, leadership development, teaching, pastoral care, neighborhood relationships, or something neither you nor the congregation had previously imagined.

The goal is not to arrange ministry entirely around your preferences.

Nor is the goal to return automatically to a pattern simply because it existed before.

The better question may be:

Given what we have learned about me, the congregation, and our shared ministry, is there a healthier and more fruitful way to distribute our life and work together?

Something I might want to initiate conversation about:

Why I think it could serve both me and the congregation:

What I need to hear from congregational leaders before reaching conclusions:

This is an invitation to conversation.

It does not require a new job description.

25. When the Question Is Larger

Sometimes the question that emerges is not:

How might I inhabit this call differently?

It is:

Am I still called to remain here?

Or perhaps:

Am I still called to this form of ministry?

You may have begun sabbatical fully expecting to return and continue serving this congregation for years.

Distance, rest, new experiences, or simply enough time to listen may have allowed a question to emerge that you did not expect.

Do not assume that having the question gives you the answer.

Re-entry itself can be disorienting. Moving from an unusual season of freedom back into the demands of ordinary pastoral life can produce reluctance, grief, or resistance that may not finally be about vocation at all.

Give yourself enough time to distinguish the difficulty of returning from a deeper vocational movement.

But do not dismiss a persistent question simply because it is inconvenient.

If the question remains, bring someone trustworthy into the discernment.

In a Presbyterian setting, that might be an Executive or General Presbyter, your Commission on Ministry liaison, or a trusted colleague who understands both you and the call process. A spiritual director, coach, therapist, or another trusted companion may also help you listen to what is happening within you.

You do not need to bring an unresolved vocational question into the congregation's initial re-entry conversation.

Give it appropriate time and accompaniment.

But neither should an important vocational question remain indefinitely suspended.

What question am I actually asking?

Who would be a wise companion for this discernment?

When will I return intentionally to the question?

You do not need the answer today.

Part Nine — Three Months Later

26. Ordinary Ministry Has Gravity

Three months have passed.

The calendar filled again.

Sermons needed writing.

Meetings returned.

People needed care.

Decisions needed making.

Some things you hoped to preserve probably survived.

Some probably did not.

Do not turn that into a judgment on the sabbatical.

Notice.

Something from sabbatical that is still giving me life:

Something I hoped to preserve that has become difficult:

An old pattern I slipped back into:

Something I now know I genuinely want to recover:

Something I thought would matter that no longer seems very important:

Ordinary ministry has gravity.

The question is not whether you resisted it perfectly.

The question is what you can see now that you have lived within it again.

27. How Are You Inhabiting Your Call Now?

The question is not:

Am I still rested?

Rest gets used.

A more enduring question is whether sabbatical helped you see anything differently about how you inhabit your vocation.

What do I understand differently about my call?

What do I understand differently about myself?

What do I understand differently about this congregation?

Where am I exercising my gifts more fully?

Where am I still giving energy to things that do not require me?

What conversation still needs to happen?

28. If a Larger Question Remains

If a significant vocational question emerged during sabbatical, return to it now.

Three months of ordinary ministry have given you more information.

Perhaps the question has receded.

Notice that.

Perhaps it remains but is still unclear.

Continue the discernment with people you trust.

Or perhaps it has become clearer.

If you are increasingly convinced that another call, another form of ministry, retirement, or departure from pastoral ministry may be ahead, this may be the time to move from open-ended reflection toward intentional discernment and appropriate denominational consultation.

In the Presbyterian system, receiving another call can take many months. Beginning that process does not necessarily mean an immediate departure. It does mean acknowledging that the question has become more than a passing thought.

Talk with appropriate presbytery leadership about the call process and, when the time comes, about how and when the congregation should be informed.

There is no need to manufacture certainty before it exists.

But once a decision to leave becomes real, the work changes.

The question is no longer simply:

Should I leave?

It becomes:

How can I end this ministry faithfully and well?

At that point, the **Ending Well** resources in the *Navigating Pastoral Transitions* series may help you begin preparing for the work of ending one ministry before beginning another.

29. The Next Sabbatical Begins Now

Not because you need another one immediately.

Because sustainable ministry is not created by one extended period of renewal every several years.

What did sabbatical teach you about ordinary life?

What belongs weekly?

Monthly?

Annually?

What relationships need regular attention?

What restores me physically?

What feeds curiosity?

What helps me remain connected to God without turning the relationship into pastoral work?

What boundaries protect my capacity to love people rather than merely respond to them?

What do I want to remember before ministry becomes crowded again?

Perhaps this is one of the quieter gifts of sabbatical.

You do not have to wait another six or seven years to receive everything you learned about what gives you life.

Some of it may belong in the life you are living now.

A Final Word

You do not have to emerge from sabbatical transformed.

You do not have to return with a vision.

You do not have to become more productive.

You do not have to prove that the congregation’s investment was worthwhile.

You may have rested deeply.

You may have spent unhurried time with people you love.

You may have traveled somewhere you had long wanted to see or discovered that staying close to home was exactly what you needed.

You may have remembered the pleasure of becoming interested in something for no useful reason.

Prayer may have become easier—or it may not have.

You may have returned grateful for your vocation and the congregation you serve.

You may have returned with questions.

You may have discovered that the ministry you love needs to be inhabited a little differently.

Or you may have discovered nothing that can be easily named.

Receive that too.

Sabbatical is not a problem-solving technique.

It is a season in a life.

For a while, you were released from carrying the ordinary responsibilities of pastoral ministry.

You were given room to live, rest, play, pray, wonder, love, learn, wander, create, receive, and pay attention.

Now you have returned.

Not necessarily as a different person.

But perhaps as someone able to see something again that had become difficult to see while carrying so much.

Do not hurry to make it useful.

Remember what these days have given you.

And carry into the life ahead whatever is ready to be carried.