

THE VALUE OF A SABBATICAL

**Refocusing Your Life
for a Healthy Future**

by Steve Prokopchak



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Foreword

When I am with Steve, we find ourselves talking about people we respect and treasure. We both care about people, a lot. Steve lives to equip people, especially those who lead others. He wants them to succeed.

Over the years, Steve has observed that many competent leaders become so busy meeting the demands of the people around them that they neglect their own health and personal needs. As leaders' spheres of responsibilities expand, family members are often pushed into the background.

Many people feel validated by their busyness. It seems sacrificial and honorable. But it is not. Instead, the result is burnout, loss of vision and frustration.

There are times a leader needs to say "no" to people's expectations and look after himself. Our bodies recognize this, and will at times force us to stop.

"Timeout" is called in sporting events. Team players need to regroup, rest and regain perspective. And then go back into battle again.

This book comes out of years of experience with real people. Steve serves those from many cultures who carry diverse gifts. But they are all people, sons and daughters, who carry a mixture of the human and divine.

Those who read this and implement sabbaticals, which Steve is calling for, will find themselves moving from one level of fruitfulness and joy to the next. We are meant to move from good seasons to better ones. But we need to take time to reflect,

learn new skills and look to the heart of the Father. Otherwise, we plateau, lose our edge and become people who are really not leading others anywhere.

To work from REST is sustainable. There is a small price to pay for this growth: there are times of temporary feelings of alienation or disorientation. But if you and I take Steve's suggestions, our future will be better than the past.

Because the destiny of others is linked to our finding and fulfilling our destiny, this book is ultimately about others. About legacy.

Consider Apostle Paul, who was a mover and shaker. Our Bibles contain maps to track his impact. But he had a season of "house arrest" where everything changed for a time. No travel, no pioneering during this time. During Paul's forced sabbatical, he wrote the "Prison Epistles," which carry the deepest understanding of the majesty and power of Christ. Paul didn't write those while traveling, raising up new leaders and planting communities. Aren't you glad that Paul was forced to take timeout for a season?

I know that our identity and security can come from fulfilling a certain role or having a nice title. But when that is shaken, something wonderful happens. The result is worth the pain.

Read this book and move into fresh joy and greater influence!

Jim Orred

Leadership Coach, Youth With A Mission

THE VALUE OF A SABBATICAL

Refocusing Your Life for a Healthy Future

Pastor Mike struggled with mental fatigue and confusion, relationship issues, sleeplessness and an overeating disorder. He was riddled with fear—of the loss of his wife and family, of the loss of his ministry, of simply losing it altogether one day. He could identify with only one biblical character: Job. Faith was far away. Mike knew he was running on fumes, going through the motions, hoping against reason that he would not end up in the psych unit of his local hospital.

Physical and spiritual exhaustion had depleted this man of God to the point that it affected his decision-making in relation to his church, family, marriage, and even to himself. Mike met with the church counselor several times a week. At first, the words “burnout,” “rest,” “vacation,” and “time with your wife and family” had surfaced. But by this point, both he and the counselor knew that taking a vacation was merely the starting point on the road to recovery. Mike’s emotional state raised other questions: If he was troubled, how was his wife, Diane, doing? How was she really doing? The children knew that their dad had been distant, and it was starting to affect how they viewed and approached him. Mom kept saying, “Pray for your dad,” and they were, but they felt confused by the unspoken conflicts they sensed.

Although the church was doing okay, it seemed to take every ounce of Mike’s energy day in and day out. He found himself

thinking, “Someone will notice eventually, and they will either fire me or get me help.” However, month after month went by, and no one seemed to notice. If they did notice, they certainly weren’t saying anything. How long could he go on like this?

Statistics show that Mike’s condition is 1) common, 2) can be around for a long time without receiving the necessary attention, and 3) is best treated by a sabbatical, a leave from work for an extended period of rest. Despite that knowledge, it’s estimated that only 5 percent of churches in the United States offer sabbaticals.

Internally, we know that a church, ministry or business cannot be built on one person or personality alone. The Fuller Institute of Church Growth reported statistics that appeared in *Pastors at Risk* by H.B. London and Neil Wiseman, published by Victor Press in 1993. Surveying 1,000 pastors revealed the following:

- 50% felt unable to meet the demands of the job, and 84% felt that their training was inadequate.
- 70% reported working more than 60 hours per week, and 45% did not take a regular day off.
- 53% averaged five to six hours of sleep each night.
- 85% spent two or less evenings home per week, yet 73% stated they had no intimate relationships beyond their spouse.
- 50% considered leaving the ministry in the last 30 months.

In a *New York Times* article, “Taking a Break from the Lord’s Work” (August 1, 2010), Paul Vitello wrote, “Members of the clergy now suffer from obesity, hypertension and depression at rates higher than most Americans. In the last decade, their use of antidepressants has risen, while their life expectancy has fallen.” Some of the statistics given included:

- 33% felt burned out within their first five years of ministry.

- 40% of pastors and 47% of spouses are suffering from burnout, frantic schedules and/or unrealistic expectations.
- 45% of pastors say they've experienced depression or burnout
- 70% have no close friend.
- 80% say they have insufficient time with their spouse.

A 2015 study conducted by Lifeway Research identified a few more positive trends among pastors. The survey researched 1,500 pastors of evangelical faith and discovered that pastors are no longer leaving the pastorate in "droves." Their role is a tough one, but the following stats were gleaned:

- 84% say they're on call 24 hours a day.
- 80% expect conflict within their local church.
- 54% find the role of pastor frequently overwhelming.
- 53% are concerned about their family's financial security.
- 48% feel ministry demands are more than they can handle.

Still "A total of 29,000 evangelical pastors have left the pastorate over the past decade." As astounding as this statistic from Lifeway Research is the following are even more astounding:

- 71% of churches have no plan for the pastor's sabbatical.
- 66% lack a support group for the pastor's family.
- 33% do not have a list of counselors for referrals.

Sound alarming? What's the answer? Yes to proper financial support and benefits. Yes to weekends away with the family and alone time with their spouse. Yes to vacations throughout the year. Yes to training and equipping for personal and professional growth. And yes to personal intercessors to pray them through the difficult times. All of these are extremely important with an emphasis on prayer support. But is it enough?

It seems many ministry and business leaders are experiencing moral failures, many of them publicly exposed by the media. Could these failures be a result of depleted spirits and drained emotions? Could the lack of recharging today have something to do with those untimely failures affecting so many people?

Leaders Burn Out

In the article "Job Burnout: How to Spot It and Take Action," which appeared in *Healthy Lifestyles* (Dec. 8, 2012), the Mayo Clinic staff wrote, "Job burnout is a special type of stress—a state of physical, emotional or mental exhaustion combined with doubts about your competence and the value of your work." The authors also believe that burnout can result from various factors such as:

- Lack of control
- Unclear job expectations
- Dysfunctional workplace dynamics
- Mismatch in values
- Poor job fit
- Extremes of activity
- Lack of social support
- Work-life balance

Leaders Fail and Leaders Fall

Leaders who fall tend to be working all the time, rarely differentiating work or ministry from rest, family time or recreation. These persons tend to think that the busier they are, the more they are needed. High levels of ongoing activity can stroke one's ego and simultaneously be disastrous to one's spirit, emotions and physical well-being.

Such leaders tend to stop listening to persons of value such as spouses, overseers, leadership teams or business boards. Not wanting to hear the warnings, they may even begin to avoid these relationships altogether. When objective input and sound advice are avoided, and a leader desires to hear only accolades for productivity, that leader is in trouble.

Other areas of depletion can be observed in these persons' lives, such as the fading of personal disciplines. I'm not merely referring to devotional and prayer times. Exercising and diet are other examples of the first regimens to go as busyness increases. Sometimes food, pornography, prescription drugs or alcohol become forms of self-medication used in order to escape increasing demands. Someone once asked a really important question along these lines: "Do we stay busy so we don't have to look at our hearts?"

These leaders may cease equipping others, losing the motivation to care for those under them and placing their own needs ahead of important relationships in their life. The combination of all these areas is disastrous to life balance and critical relationships.

Sabbaticals Are Not Only for Teachers

The North American Baptists incorporate a sabbatical policy, but it's "granted for educational purposes only." The Southern Baptists call it a "relatively novel idea," but some Southern Baptists do engage in the type of sabbatical to which we are referring to here. The Southeastern Lutheran denomination honors full-time pastoral clergy sabbaticals every four to seven years.

DOVE International is a network of local churches that has existed since 1980. With an emphasis on church planting and missions, leaders are "home-grown" and trained on the job. It

is our desire to oversee these leaders, helping them to remain healthy so they can have healthy families and healthy churches.

Within this network of churches, we have gone a step further and made the revolutionary, life-changing recommendation of what the Bible calls a Sabbath rest—sabbaticals for full-time and part-time pastoral staff once every seven years. Radical? Not really—it is one of the best preventative medicines helpful to ministers as well as to their families.

Sabbaticals are not a new idea, but one that can pose a lot of questions and resistance. Many people believe that only teachers in higher institutes of learning take sabbaticals. Wrong. In the *McClatchy-Tribune* newspaper article, "Mid-Career Sabbaticals Are the New Antidote to Burnout" (Nov. 18, 2007), writer Cindy Krischner Goodman reports, "Among the Fortune 100 Best Places to Work, 22 companies boast of offering fully paid sabbaticals. The Society of Human Resources reports the percentage of large companies that offer sabbaticals has doubled in the past five years. Companies find if they don't do something, their workers will burn out and leave, or worse, burn out and stay." Since 1992, workers at American Express who have been employed for ten years have been able to apply for a paid sabbatical. Procter and Gamble employees can take a sabbatical of up to twelve weeks every seven years. The leave is unpaid but benefits remain. Within the article, Stacy Orange of American Express notes that, "Employees come back [from sabbaticals] more energized and loyal, with a new appreciation of the value that the company places on being a good corporate citizen."

In a *New York Times* (May 30, 2014) article, "Why You Hate Work," authors Tony Schwartz and Christine Porath discussed

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Re-introduced to Sanity, Our Sabbatical Experience

I entered our sabbatical by saying to God, “If you let me loose from ministry, I won’t be back.”

I had every intention of making good on those words. My husband and I had planted a church eight years prior. We were tired and weary. Greg led worship, preached, counseled, moved people, visited hospitals and prisons, you name it. I led children’s ministry almost every Sunday. Among all these activities and raising a young family, we were running on fumes. Both my husband and I ascribed to the belief that if only we worked harder, things would be better. We had a difficult time separating ministry and us: if we were frustrated with something at church, we became frustrated with each other.

We had seen people come to Christ, marriages restored and lives changed through the power of Christ on the cross. We had also seen a few marriages end and lives shattered under the onslaught of sin. We had seen people come and go. Some left graciously, and others made sure we knew that we had not measured up to their expectations and needs.

My husband said that he felt as if he were a loaf of bread on a conveyer belt, with piece after piece being picked away as it went by. The loaf was almost gone. Although we didn’t know how to fix it, we knew people had unhealthy expectations of us, and we had unhealthy expectations of each other.

We took our sabbatical during the summer. We spent time together as a family and made some great memories. We lived free from the tyranny of the schedule. We met with our oversight, with a marriage counselor and a ministry coach, and received valuable wisdom and counsel. We were able to go to a ministry conference and just receive, and the Lord was faithful to minister to us.

During the last portion of our sabbatical, each of us took some time to get away with God. We went separately to a retreat center. While on my time away, I became what I can only describe as “emotionally up to date.” I cried. I gave words to my anger, my frustration, my hurt, my loss, my regret. I poured out my heart. I repented. God heard me. He washed me, and He healed me. He spoke words of life to me. He renewed me. He forgave me and refreshed me.

At the end of our sabbatical, I was not the same person. I had renewed passion for God and for the church. I had new clarity on who I was and who I wasn’t. I was now listening to my heart and believed the Lord was too. I knew that my heart mattered to God, to my husband, to myself. I was no longer working for God; I was His daughter, basking in His love and acceptance.

Sabbatical is not a panacea for problems. Old problems were awaiting our return and new problems were en route. But we were changed. We had stepped back, we had climbed up and we could see more clearly now. We had been re-introduced to God’s glorious grace and that shed a new light on everything. We are ministering out of God’s love and acceptance of us, instead of working to gain His approval and that of others.

how employees derive meaning and significance from their work and found that, “The most obvious answer is that systematically investing in employees, beyond paying them a salary, didn’t seem necessary until recently. So long as employees were able to meet work demands, employers were under no pressure to address their more complex needs. Increasingly, however, employers are recognizing that the relentless stresses of increased demand—caused in large part by digital technology—must be addressed.” The authors advocate for more times of rest that enable employees to become more productive and satisfied.

After being primary leaders for ten straight years, one pastoral couple said to me, “In our present ministry, without a break, we began to wear out. There was no major sin in our lives, just exhaustion in every way. In our marriage, we kept repeating the same old issues without resolve. While in counseling during the sabbatical, we discovered that ministry issues and marriage issues were intertwined in unhealthy ways.” Further, they observed, “There seemed to be no line that said ‘here I am’ and ‘here ministry is.’”

I like the expression, “Check your gauges.” Just like the gauges on a car monitor the water temperature or the oil pressure, we need to monitor our bodies and our spirit. Are we depleting ourselves? What are our faith gauges and our love gauges reading? What about our compassion gauge? When approaching personal depletion, the above areas begin to suffer, and we can begin to lose our patience with others as well as ourselves.

What Is a Sabbatical?

The term “sabbatical” is from the Hebrew word *shabbāth*, which means “to rest.” According to Exodus 16:23, it was a day set aside for rest, a holy day unto the Lord. A sabbatical is an

extended leave of absence from full-time/part-time ministry or marketplace environment. The purpose is to renew the leader and his or her family spiritually, physically and emotionally. It’s a time of reflection and evaluation on the past and present, a time to renew focus and vision for the future, a time to “get off the treadmill” and slow down with the goal of recharging body, mind, and spirit.

A sabbatical does not necessarily mean that no major activities are undertaken, simply that those activities should be oriented toward “retooling” for the future. Retooling can include reading, taking a class, attending a conference or training seminar or receiving counseling for objective, unbiased feedback.

After some friends of mine completed a prescribed sabbatical, the wife said, “We needed to get away, to detach. . . .no church leadership, no business, no email and no constant evening meetings. We needed counseling for our marriage and ourselves. We needed some time for inward reflection and refocus. We needed fresh vision and revelation from the Lord, and we needed some thorough evaluation in order to make some important decisions for our future.”

Most sports incorporate something called a time-out, which allows the players time to get off the field of play, to catch their breath and to refocus before returning to the game. There is a purpose in this repose—no one can continue to function at their best playing the game without a break. A sabbatical is in effect, a time-out.

What a Sabbatical Is Not

Sabbaticals vary throughout many institutions, but for our purposes, a sabbatical is not an extended vacation. It is not a sick

leave or to be used for other ministry opportunities. It is not a time to pursue academic degrees. It is not a time to accomplish all other life tasks or to “get caught up on all the chores” for which you don’t normally have time. It’s neither healthy nor productive to enter into areas or environments during sabbaticals that would detract from the purpose of personal and family renewal.

Preventative Medicine

An old TV commercial advocated changing oil in your car regularly. It featured a mechanic saying, “Pay me now, or pay me later,” meaning, if you paid him later, the bill would be much higher from a lack of preventative maintenance. Many years ago, I served in the U.S. Air Force as a jet aircraft crew chief. The importance of preventative maintenance was drilled into our crew in order that our planes would stay in the air without failures. The Air Force believed without hesitation that proper maintenance on the ground kept planes flying in the air. During my four-year interim, we never lost one jet at our base.

Sabbaticals are preventative maintenance for the spirit and the soul. Unfortunately many leadership teams, boards, CEOs, managers and senior pastors resist this essential step in work and ministry life until they are forced to concede to a sabbatical due to burnout, marriage problems or moral failure. Then a sabbatical is thought to be a panacea, a cure-all, with a brand-new person emerging after two or three months off.

Sabbaticals are not a miracle cure for burnout or sinful failures—rather, they help prevent them from happening in the first place. Persons who engage in sabbaticals are far less likely to burn out and leave their job or ministry prematurely. In fact, leaders who take sabbaticals are inclined to continue employment longer

than they originally intended. Valuing leaders and promoting a sabbatical affirms them in their life call. It says, “You are so important to us that we have a greater desire for you to be healthy than to have you on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, year after year.” When a business or a congregation encourages a sabbatical, it is loving, affirming and caring for its leaders.

Isaiah 30:15 tells us, “In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength.”

In an evaluation of his sabbatical, one pastor wrote that the elders left in charge of the church functioned quite well. While it wasn’t without problems, he revealed that it gave the elders a new respect for what he deals with on a daily basis in his ministry life, and he was proud of the fact that the elders handled the issues with grace and maturity. It was a testimony of how he as a leader had been developing and encouraging leadership skills within his eldership team.

Let’s Get Specific

By definition, a sabbatical is to be preventative in that every seventh year, God instructed the people to allow their fields to rest (Leviticus 25:3-4). This Sabbath rest provided a time of recovery for the land as well as the people. In Mark 2:28, Jesus declared that He was “Lord of the Sabbath” while at the same time revealing that man should benefit from a time of rest: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” What was He saying? The Sabbath was made to benefit mankind, and not mankind to benefit the Sabbath.

In the Old Testament, the observance of a Sabbath indicated a prosperous faith in the Lord, while the neglect of this principle

showed a decay of faith. The penalty for breaking this law was a harsh one: death, a type of “rest or else” principle (Numbers 15:30-36).

Every creature God created needs rest, a period of cessation. “Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest” (Exodus 23:12). The New Testament allowed one day of rest (Romans 14:5-6, 10; Colossians 2:14-17). Rest was God’s idea—He rested in creation. Was He tired from all His effort? No, He was setting an example for us.

A Sabbath rest creates opportunity for physical, emotional and spiritual pause. For the designated length of the sabbatical, you are to discover a lifestyle and a discipline toward searching out rest for your whole being.

The Psalmist wrote, “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts” (Psalm 139:23). This is both a revealing and powerful prayer to pray during a sabbatical.

Jesus: Our Example

Did Jesus rest? We know He was the fulfillment of the Sabbath as a law, but what about life breaks, time away, reflection and evaluation? I believe He took those times. Two of my favorite scriptures about the life of Jesus are found in the book of Matthew: “That same day, Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake” (Matthew 13:1). Later, “When Jesus heard what had happened, He withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place” (Matthew 14:13). We know that, quite often, Jesus pursued time alone to pray (Matthew 14:23), but just to sit by a lake? Sure, He was praying, and of course He was thinking and listening, but just to sit by a body of water, well—it’s refreshing, it’s renewing, it helps to clear the mind and refocus on life priorities. Many of us love to

sit by the ocean, hearing its repetitive sounds and marveling at the unending rolling waves. Put simply, it’s therapeutic.

Oftentimes, Jesus was inundated with requests. On one occasion, the Scripture records that ministry for Him and His disciples was so full that on occasions, there was not even time for them to eat. Jesus shared the solution in Mark 11 when He said to His weary disciples, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.” Jesus, the Son of God, knew about the value of rest and incorporated it in His earthly life.

Because of a life of prayer and setting aside times to be alone, Jesus never appeared to burn out. He never lost His compassion (Matthew 9:35-36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34). Jesus knew who He was (John 8:12-14). He participated in weddings and parties, enjoying times of laughter and joy (John 2:1, 3). He knew how to get away and call a time-out. Perhaps you never thought of the wedding at Cana this way, but He could have said “no” to the invitation. He could have continued about His Father’s business and not taken the time to attend a wedding celebration, one in which He would even choose to perform a creative miracle for the guests.

Two Worlds

We exist in two worlds: the spiritual and the natural. Even now, at this moment, we are both 100 percent spiritual and 100 percent natural. That’s why James 4:1 says we can have “fights and quarrels among” us, and then in verse 5 it’s recorded that more grace is given by the Spirit that God “caused to live in us.” God gives us His Spirit so we can live in both the spiritual and the natural, but we are not to love the natural more than the spiritual. God desires to have a relationship with us through His Spirit so that we do not fulfill the desires of the flesh. When our

natural being is burned out, run down or over-burdened, we're more susceptible to depression and failure through the attacks of the enemy. If our spirit remains strong, replenished and renewed, that openness to attack decreases in great measure.

Pastor Mike, in his state of depression and burnout, took everything personally. He had no offensive weapon ready in the spirit; all he had were feelings of defensiveness and insecurity. With each new attack from the enemy, Pastor Mike sunk lower and lower.

Building and Planning for a Sabbatical

At DOVE International, our sabbaticals are typically two months in length. Just prior to the end of this time, an evaluation is conducted, and extensions to the sabbatical can be recommended. A sabbatical is rarely longer than three months.

Financial support and benefits are maintained throughout this time. Vacation days are not used. Compensation for travel or education is considered. Because budgets are usually set a year ahead and because sabbaticals are meant to be preventative, sabbaticals are often planned a year in advance. Not only do they need to be built into the annual budget, but also interim help may need to be coordinated in order to prepare properly and cover a staff person's extended time away.

If the senior pastor is taking a sabbatical, the remaining elder-ship and ministry team and ministry associates must be a vital part of the sabbatical planning process to ensure coverage while the pastor is away. It is this team that will be totally responsible for the oversight of the local church in the absence of its primary leader. Questions such as, "Who will help with ongoing training?" and "Who will oversee the elders, since the 'lead elder' is

on sabbatical?" and "To whom will the elders report?" are key in order to have the sabbatical accomplish what it is intended to do. Further, it's an opportunity for leaders to release one another and allow responsibility and authority to be tested.

At DOVE International, we strongly discourage the person on a sabbatical from attending his or her home church during time away. Otherwise the person can be drawn back into ministerial responsibilities. The congregation must be encouraged and coached to let go of the leader during the sabbatical—no phone calls, no visits, no email updates and no unplanned drop-ins. Although these requirements seem like a harsh cutoff, we believe that by maintaining contact, you can be drawn back into feeling responsible to help those members in your congregation who face difficulties. As well, members of the congregation and other staff persons will also realize during this time their need to be less dependent upon the one engaging in a sabbatical. The leadership team(s) must help protect the leader from these interruptions during this time.

A Four-Phase Approach

Phase One: Disengage and Rest

Phase one is the disengage/rest phase. It includes anything that will help to empty your mind and empty your hands from the needs of ministry or business. It could take the form of time away with the family, pleasure reading, naps, quiet time, exercise, sports, a small work project at home or watching entertaining movies. The goal of this phase is to stop the ministry mentality, constant life interruptions, and 24/7 on-call duties in order to empty your mind so your spirit can prepare to receive. Said briefly, this phase is a time of detachment.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Detaching

At first, the thought of detaching from ministry and our church family was scary. How could we cut off ties from responsibilities and the people we loved? We knew that physically and emotionally we needed a sabbatical. What was holding us back? After praying about it, we recognized that we had somehow become defined by the positions we held rather than by who we are as God's children.

The first week of our sabbatical felt very strange, as if something was missing from our lives. But we kept moving forward through the days of detachment and each one got easier and easier.

One thing the Lord revealed to us, during the detachment period, was that we truly did not know how to function as a family outside of the church walls. We had not drawn proper boundaries for our marriage, our family or our church. All three had become unhealthily intermingled.

We love the church and our ministry to the local body of believers to whom God has entrusted to us, but we had to reorder our priorities rightly before the Lord. After our personal relationships with God, our marriage had to be at the forefront of the life we have built together, then our children, then our ministry.

We are thankful that God has been gracious to us and preserved us during this time of disorder in our lives. We are grateful that He has helped us to follow His word to re-prioritize our lives.

Perhaps there's a former passion that you have placed so far off to the side that you rarely engage in it. For example, fishing, craft making or hiking, at one time in your life, may have recharged you. Consider trying that outlet again. This former "restorative" refreshment might even be something you carry into your post-sabbatical life.

Allow us to recommend that during this phase you unplug from social media and stay unplugged for the duration of your sabbatical. Why? From the ongoing social media posts, you can once again be tempted to stay up with persons to whom you were giving oversight to or continually read feeds about needs that you are tempted to respond to. A break, a rest from social media is an important part of each phase of a sabbatical.

Phase Two: Retooling and Refocusing

Phase two is the retooling/refocusing phase, which includes training and equipping. This is a time to take in that seminar or conference (where no one knows you and you have no responsibilities), or perhaps an evening class at a local university. It's a time to read books that promote personal health and life balances. What is it that the Lord desires to teach you? Read books on that subject.

During my last sabbatical, when I was in phase two, I left Pennsylvania and traveled to the West Coast to attend a conference. I did not expect that anyone would know me. I planned to sit in the back, just take it all in and receive from the Father. But the first night I attended, I heard someone from behind whispering loudly, "Steve!" Confident that no one knew me there, I resisted turning around. *Surely it's another Steve*, I thought. Then

I heard, “Steve Prokopchak!” Now I had to turn around, and I saw someone from a church I oversee in Kentucky. Fortunately, after he heard that I was on a sabbatical, he honored that and left me to God.

Phase two is also the best phase for personal, marriage or family counseling. During my first sabbatical, my overseer recommended that my entire family (wife and three children) attend counseling. It was not because we were having problems; my overseer thought that the professional counselor could provide some objective input into my family and that it would allow my children to speak their hearts. We had to promise our children a meal at a restaurant after the session, but they went. And they did enjoy it . . . mostly. I know that I learned a lot from hearing my children’s answers to the questions that the counselor wisely asked of them. They were questions that Dad could ask, but there was much less resistance to answering when they were coming from a trained counselor.

Phase Three: Regeneration or Renewal

Phase three is the regeneration or renewal phase. By the time phase three is entered, you have rested, played and worshipped to your heart’s delight, been equipped personally, spent time with family members, and are now ready to spend an extended period of time with God. This is the phase you have been working toward and anticipating. It’s where evaluation of past ministry/business, present ministry/business, goals and your personal life—all of the natural and the spiritual—really takes place. Only now, because the time has been properly taken, is your spirit and natural self ready to be renewed and regenerated for assessing the future. It’s a fantastic time of pressing in and listening, devouring the

Word of God, praying and fasting, worshipping and meditating, and drinking in all God has to say. I recommend having a pen and paper or electronic device always ready, for He will speak and you will hear more clearly. You will likely remember your nightly dreams and may even enjoy visions. Some have reported personal visitations of the Holy Spirit and revelations directly from heaven; others have reported receiving word pictures that reveal future direction.

Because there are seasons to life and work, sometimes a sabbatical is an excellent vehicle for separation from one season and transitioning to a new season of life. It can serve as the in-between time where you release the former to discover and grab hold of the new. It may mean you are leaving the familiar in order to experience something fresh. Phase three can help you not only to embrace this season but also prepare you emotionally, mentally and spiritually for the changes ahead.

Phase three must include time away, alone, in a neutral place where you can be as loud as you want to and not disturb others. Hotels are not a good option. Find that place beside the lake as Jesus did, whether that “lake” is a cabin in the mountains, a retreat center, a friend’s vacation home, or a tent on the beach. Find a place where you can go hiking or running or cycling. Find a place where you can be on your face with your Father in heaven and not be concerned about anyone seeing or hearing you.

My friend, Peter, participated in an invigorating, life-changing, mind-molding time away during one of his sabbaticals: he participated in an eight-day silent, guided retreat. In his own words, the retreat “was an opportunity to fully disengage from normal everyday life activity and to hear God exceptionally clearly.”

In their own words

One Pastor's Sabbatical Experience

Several years ago, I was thankful to be able to experience a period of sabbatical. My sabbatical season was broken into three phases, along with a preparation phase.

I found the process of preparing for sabbatical to be quite enriching. I was forced to look at every area I was leading and delegate a number of responsibilities which I should never have started leading in the first place. To my surprise, I discovered that I was not indispensable as the primary leader. Capable and willing people were quickly found to lead all that needed to be covered.

The first phase focused on disengaging and resting from the work of the church. I was unpleasantly surprised to find how difficult I found the disengagement part. For the first week or two, I was worried and stressed, wondering if this or that detail was being covered. My dear wife kept assuring me that we had good, competent people covering everything and they would do fine. At some point, I was able to relax and trust God and God's people to cover the church without me.

The people of the church did a wonderful job of not calling or emailing me. In fact, I had no contact with anyone from the church while on sabbatical. Also during this phase, I worked on some household projects. One of the most enjoyable parts of this phase was visiting other churches in the region—some churches like ours and some quite different. Our children enjoyed discussing the

churches we visited, and I took pages of notes about how others "did church."

The second phase of the sabbatical was a retooling phase. I engaged in a healthy vacation with my wife and family while I worked through the book list I had developed. Ordering Your Private World by Gordon MacDonald was a highlight. While in this phase, I also attended a leadership conference in California.

The third phase involved serious evaluation of past, present and future ministry, the regeneration or renewal phase. Where had I been? Where am I now? Where am I going? To what destination do I feel God calling me? How long should I pastor? What kind of succession plan should I be developing? What will life look like after I am no longer pastoring? During this phase, I also enjoyed a personal prayer retreat for reflection, uninterrupted time with God and renewal.

This period of sabbatical was a significant milestone in my life and in my ministry. The time passed much too quickly. I learned so much (good and bad), about how I think and operate as a leader. I had time to read and pursue God's voice in deeper ways than ever before. I was able to truly rest and feel refreshed for the first in a long time. Without the constant pressure and stress of ministry, I emerged with new vision, new strength, new strategies and renewed resolution to minister. A regular sabbatical is a must for every leader.

Phase Four: Resolution

Phase four is the resolution phase. Resolution is a firm or unwavering determination toward a solved problem or solution. In this phase, work at implementing boundaries and healthy policies for sustainability, which you had discerned and implemented into your life during your Sabbath rest. This phase requires forming a written plan that outlines how you will sustain and act on what you heard and experienced throughout your sabbatical time. Of the four phases, this is the one that can be missed, or at the very least not properly followed through. Returning to life as “usual” can quickly cause you to fall back into former and/or unhealthy life patterns.

Recently we engaged in a lengthy Skype call with a couple who had completed their first two-month sabbatical. We discussed how to move their new and healthy life patterns, implemented during the sabbatical, into everyday home and work environments. They determined to initiate these changes and policies through effective communication with family and team members. Together they spoke of formulating a built-in accountability system to prevent gravitating backward to former, unhealthy patterns.

One of those new patterns was to maintain something that started during sabbatical: Every Friday morning, two hours were set aside to communicate openly and engage in a time of prayer together. This one step should set them on a course of improved communication and connection as a couple on a weekly basis.

In Deuteronomy 5:15 God reminded the Israelites they were once slaves in Egypt and He had brought them out of slavery by his mighty hand. He then told them to observe the Sabbath day. It was a reminder of what the Father had done.

In the resolution phase we are reminded to not go back to any pattern of “slavery,” i.e., burnout or unhealthy life patterns.

Oversight and Evaluation

Evaluation and oversight are important throughout this process. Who will oversee you during the sabbatical? Who will hold you accountable not to be working on ministry duties? Who will provide evaluation of your sabbatical time? This person must be wisely selected, a trusted overseer who will be honest with you and your family. Evaluation takes place both before and during the sabbatical and will help you to determine what needs the sabbatical should help meet (family, personal, educational, counseling, financial, etc.) and whether they are being met. Then final recommendations are made, and the process is determined for transition back into ministry or business life or to whatever God has determined is the next phase in your life.

Unexpected Interruptions

What if during the course of your sabbatical there is a family emergency or crisis interruption to your scheduled time away? If the interruption requires only a day or two and is not an emotional drain or major time disruption, then take care of it quickly. If the crisis requires more than several days, disrupts your planned time of rest and causes you to lose focus, then you need to immediately communicate this to your overseer in order to develop make-up time on the latter end of your sabbatical. This actually did happen to me once, and I ended up having to set aside another whole week apart from my Sabbath time. I was extremely glad that my overseer had the insight to recommend this, because it became a necessary part of the overall process.

Keeping Record

Writing down what the Father has personally spoken to you is fundamental to a sabbatical. It's how you will enact goals to make the necessary changes for the future. What role changes are necessary, if any? What personal changes are needed? What habits need to change? What part of your ministry/job description can and should be delegated to someone else so that you can move on to your next phase in life or ministry? It involves delving into those practical questions implemented by Peter Drucker, a well-known authority on the principles of effective management: 1) What am I doing that does not need to be done? 2) What am I doing that could be done by somebody else? 3) What am I doing that only I can do?

At the end of one of my sabbaticals, the Father spoke these words to me: "You have lived half your life. The first half has been one-to-one. The second half will be one-to-many." I knew that I had to make certain changes to follow God's instruction or I would be headed for trouble, not to mention disobedience. The biggest change was to move away from one-on-one personal counseling in an attempt to effect change in the lives of a greater number of people through seminars and writing. It also meant openness to more travel—an even larger life change for me.

What about You?

Could a sabbatical be what Jesus is ordering for you? Would His prescription pad say, "Take a break; we need time together"? Sometimes our spouses say, "We need to talk," which I've learned also means, "You need to listen." Could the Father be saying this to you? I am not asking if you're burned out or ready to quit. What I'm asking is, do you want to stay in ministry and/or business

for a long time and not burn out? Do you want to continue to be the CEO and have a fresh perspective? If you do, consider this biblical preventative medicine called Sabbath rest.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11: 28-30).

Perhaps you're not the senior pastor, but you've read this and felt concerned for your pastor. Prayerfully consider presenting the idea of a sabbatical to him or her along with the eldership team. To those of you whose present ministry is in the marketplace, all of the above is applicable to you, as well. Consider a sabbatical policy for your workforce, to help keep leaders healthy by preventing more and even greater losses and failures.

Once you've decided to take a sabbatical, the following questions have been formatted to help you encounter the most thorough preparation and the most productive times of reflection. Take your time and do not be overwhelmed by the many questions that follow. They are there as a guide for your benefit. You might consider looking over them after phase one, your disengagement period of sabbatical. Finally, there is a sample employer sabbatical policy on page 38 and a sample employee guideline on page 39 for you and your workplace to consider.

A sabbatical is preventative medicine created by God because He knew His creation needed rest. One of the many definitions of the word rest is to be at peace or ease. Do not wait until you are at "dys-ease" and think at that point you would consider some form of a miraculous cure which includes time away. The first part of verse 10 in Psalm 46 says, "Be still, and know that I am God." A sabbatical is a time to be still and know God.

Preparing for Your Sabbatical

In preparation for your sabbatical the following are questions to consider:

1. What is the purpose of my sabbatical?
2. What do I desire to accomplish?
3. What questions do I desire to have answered?
4. What areas of needed growth do I desire to address?
5. Who will give me oversight and accountability during this time?
6. In what ways would I like to detach in order to complete phase one?
7. What family connections do I desire to make?
8. How will my spouse enter into this sabbatical with me?
9. How will I cut off e-mail, text and social media communication?
10. Will I need personal, marriage and/or family counseling?
11. Have I turned all my responsibilities over to others and appointed others to take my place?
12. Have I scheduled a physical exam for my personal health check-up?
13. Have I developed an exercise routine for my sabbatical?
14. Have I scheduled sufficient play times within the coming weeks?

Going Deeper into Your Sabbatical

Steps beyond preparation. While in phase one, consider the following questions to prepare for phases two through four:

1. What areas of training do I hope to receive?
2. What type of books do I desire to read or listen to?
3. What conference can I participate in for personal growth?
4. What word and/or life studies in the Bible do I desire to complete?
5. Have I located training material (podcasts, live streams, CDs, books, etc.) for personal input?
6. Where will I stay for phase three during times of rest, prayer and fasting?
7. What forms of evaluation will be needed and who will be involved?

Narrowing Down Your Work Environment

1. What is it that you feel especially gifted at within your workplace?
2. Which areas of your current job give you particular satisfaction?
3. In what areas do others come to you for input and assistance?
4. In considering your current work environment, what are the areas that you would like to delegate to others?
5. Are there certain work environments that you enjoy over others and why?
6. Are there particular work environments that you find yourself circumventing?
7. When people solicit input from you, in what areas of life or within which subjects is this?
8. Are these the areas in which you presently focus your energies? If not, are these the areas you desire to move toward within your future work environment?
9. Can you articulate any work dreams, goals or desires that you desire to see fulfilled?
10. If you could focus on two or three of your most valued work areas, what would they be?

Leadership Team Questions

Questions for your leadership team's feedback.

1. In what ways do you see me adding the most significance to this work/ministry team?
2. What are the areas where I need support in order to perform more efficiently?
3. What part of my job description would be better handled by someone else?
4. In what areas do you feel I excel?
5. Are there areas of this work environment that you feel I could be an asset, but am presently not involved with?
6. Are there areas that you feel I would possess the potential to be creative in developing something new?
7. Do you have any further input for me as I evaluate my roles and responsibilities?

Your Job Description Exercise

Take the time to write out your current job description.

From your job description, answer the following questions:

1. What am I doing that does not need to be done?
2. What am I doing that could be done by somebody else?
3. What am I doing that only I can do?
4. What should I be doing that I am not?
5. What are the job description changes I need to make, and how can I incorporate them into my workplace?

Now take the time to describe your ultimate job description (This is a do-anything dream exercise):

1. What would you do?
2. Where would you do it?
3. For whom would you do it?

Motivation for Work

Consider these questions:

1. Has my work been out of obedience or passion?
2. Have I begun to work out of my own reasoning and personal experience versus out of wisdom from God?
3. When I work, for whom am I ultimately working, and why?
4. How well have I incorporated the gifts God has given me in my work?
5. How has my work/ministry motivation changed over the years (for the positive or the negative)?
6. How has my attitude changed over the years (for the positive or the negative)?
7. How have I been able to continue to work as unto the Lord over the past years?
8. What difference do I feel I have made within my scope of responsibility in the workplace, community, local church and beyond?
9. Do I see any evidence of burnout in my work or my life?
10. How much do I dream about change within my field of responsibility? How often do I write down those dreams? How often do I pray about them?
11. How excited am I to return to work on Monday mornings?
12. After a normal vacation period, how excited am I to return to work?

Reflection Questions and Sabbatical Activities

1. What are the lessons I have learned in life? (Use brief phrases such as, “Confess quickly; repent fully.” It’s okay if there are one hundred of them—keep thinking and writing.)
2. Who are the persons who have most shaped my life, and how? (Give their name and what influence they’ve had on you, both positive and negative.)
3. Who are the persons at this stage of life that I admire the most, and why? (For example, what have they taught me to aspire to?)
4. What do I desire to experience throughout the remainder of my life on earth before going to my eternal home?
5. What are the major mistakes I have made as a leader in my lifetime, and what have I learned from those mistakes?
6. Am I meditating daily on the word of God?
How can I maintain and grow this discipline?
7. How do I listen to the Holy Spirit in my life?
8. Who are my sons and daughters in the Lord, and how am I mentoring them?
9. How close are my friendships, and what am I doing to nurture them?
10. Am I walking in sexual integrity? Do I stay away from pornography or do I struggle with this area, and why? What am I doing to be freed of this struggle?

11. How are my finances, and am I maintaining a budget?
Am I generous with that which God has blessed me?
How am I practically helping the poor and the widow?
12. How am I serving within my own community?
13. Do I have others praying for me?
14. Am I accountable, and if so, to whom?
Is my life an open book?
15. Who are my business/ministry mentors and who are my spiritual parents?
16. Have I stopped seeking the approval of man and found the approval of God? (Galatians 1:10)
17. How am I dealing with stress in my life?
Are there any areas that are particularly stressful right now?
18. How will my discipline of prayer grow during this time, and how can I maintain this discipline as a priority?
19. Is my value tied to how well I perform in business, my productivity, or approval from others in any ways?
20. Have I discovered my “lake”? (Matthew 13:1) What is my lake and how often will I need to find myself there in an attempt to enjoy a personal retreat?
21. If you are married with a family, consider asking your spouse and your children for feedback concerning the importance you place upon your work. Is there a healthy balance between time at work and time with family members?

Resources through a Renewal Program

A possible financial resource for pastors can be found at the Lilly Endowment Clergy Renewal Programs website:

www.cpx.cts.edu/renewal

This site provides an application for a “clergy renewal program” through a sabbatical. They receive applications a year in advance of the actual granting to help in sabbatical funding. It takes a considerable amount of premeditated time and thought to apply. You can find an application on-line with time frames outlined.

Employer Sabbatical Policy and Guidelines

The following are suggestions for a sabbatical policy.

1. All full-time and/or part-time staff members shall be eligible for a sabbatical after _____ years of employment. The recommended length of sabbatical is _____.
2. Staff members must work with their oversight ahead of time for leave dates and financial considerations.
3. Sabbaticals are not considered vacations, but salary and benefits will continue during this time. In addition, extra costs should be considered for personal retreats and seminars.
4. An overseer shall be appointed for oversight and accountability during the sabbatical.
5. Prior to the sabbatical, a written plan must be submitted. The plan should outline the four phases of the sabbatical time and how the sabbatical will be implemented and utilized properly.
6. The person taking the sabbatical must submit proof of all areas of responsibility that will need to be covered during his/her leave of absence, including job descriptions for each.
7. An evaluation shall occur at least 10-15 days before returning to the workplace to assess further needs and re-entry into the workplace.

Sample Sabbatical Guidelines

DOVE International incorporates the following sabbatical policy.

Definition

The term sabbatical is from the Hebrew word *shabbāth*, which means “to rest.” According to Exodus 16:23, it was a day set aside for rest as holy and unto the Lord. A sabbatical is an extended leave of absence from full-time or part-time ministry. The purpose is to renew the leader and his or her family spiritually, physically and emotionally. It is a time of reflection on the past and present and a time to renew focus and vision for the future. It is a time to get off the “treadmill,” slow down and recharge your spirit and soul.

The sabbatical is not an extended vacation. It is not a sick leave or to be used for pursuing other ministry opportunities. It is not a time to pursue academic degrees. It is not a time to accomplish all other life tasks that one does not normally have time for. It would not be healthy to enter into areas or environments during a sabbatical that would distract from the purpose of personal and family renewal.

Purpose

The central purpose of a sabbatical is for spiritual, physical and emotional rest, assessment, and reevaluation of past, present, and future ministry. It is a time of reflection and a time of retooling for the future. Retooling can include reading, taking a class or classes, attending a conference or training seminar.

Prevention

This time is to be planned for. It is not to be taken out of need or “burn-out.” By definition, a sabbatical is to be preventative. Every seventh year God instructed the people to allow their fields to rest (Leviticus 25:3,4). This Sabbath provided a time of recovery for the land as well as the people. Sabbaticals would be recommended at seven-year intervals.

In Mark 2:28, Jesus declared that He was Lord of the Sabbath and He also revealed that man should benefit from a time of rest. We know this from Mark 2:27 which states, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

Length/Support

The length of a sabbatical can be determined by the need and the leaders of the local church. Generally, a sabbatical would not exceed three months and not be less than two months. The staff member receives his or her full salary and benefits during the sabbatical. Compensation for counseling, travel, training, etc. should be considered by the overseers.

The Value of a Sabbatical

Preparation

Because sabbaticals are meant to be preventative and because budgets are set approximately one year in advance, it is best to request a sabbatical twelve months ahead of time or before the budgeting process. This will allow preparation for interim persons to serve and cover ministry descriptions when the staff person is on his or her sabbatical.

Qualifications

Sabbaticals are for those persons serving in a full-time or part-time “pastoral” ministry description.

Supervision

Supervision throughout the sabbatical time is important. This person provides the necessary accountability factor for the one on sabbatical and the personal touch needed from “home base.”

It is the responsibility of the one providing supervision to call the staff person at least once every two to three weeks to be sure there is follow through with the purpose and goals of the sabbatical for the staff member and his/her family.

Evaluation

Evaluation is made before the sabbatical begins to determine needs (for example, educational/training, family, counseling, and financial needs). At this time, an outline can be designed for the purpose, goals, and needs of the staff member. Determine who will oversee the person while on sabbatical and provide regular accountability checkups.

An evaluation overview is also to be performed two weeks before the predetermined end of the sabbatical to assess further needs of the staff member and whether or not there is need to extend the sabbatical time.

Lastly, a final evaluation at the close of the sabbatical can help process the predetermined goals of this time and provide for feedback. This evaluation meeting should also serve to transition the staff member back into his/her ministry function/role.

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