

## Sabbatical (Part 1)

I love my ministry. Bluebonnet Baptist Association is a great place to serve the Lord. I enjoy assisting churches and church leaders. I love seeing new churches reach the lost. I am pumped by seeing church revitalization take place. I could not be happier with God's call to this ministry. As with all ministry leadership roles, sometimes I have to deal with things that I would rather avoid. But on the whole, serving as the BBA Executive Director is a very positive experience. It's my dream job!

I say all that so you won't misunderstand this next part: *I am ready for a sabbatical*. Not to get away from anything, but to renew my soul and recharge my batteries for future ministry.

Sometime well before I arrived in BBA, the association did a wise, forward-thinking thing. A provision was placed in our policy manual for "professional development leave" for ministerial staff. After each five years of continuous service, the staff member is eligible for a 30-day leave. This is in addition to normal vacation time. The purpose is to "renew an employee personally and professionally for future service to the BBA." It is designed to "invigorate an employee through a field-based experience."

I will be taking my first-ever sabbatical in 2014. The Administrative Team has approved my sabbatical proposal that has three components: rest, research, and reflection. Susan and I will take some unstructured time to breathe deep and renew our bodies and souls. I will then continue my Tenure Project research by interviewing a select group of long-tenured pastors outside of BBA. My focus is to continue learning about the factors that contribute to long and healthy pastoral tenure. The last third of my sabbatical will be spent reflecting on and writing about what I learned and how it might impact the association's ministry in the future. While I'm away Dr. Minton will serve as Acting Executive Director. I'll be available by voice mail in emergencies, but will otherwise stay as disconnected as possible during the leave.

I want to use my sabbatical experience to stimulate thought about this subject among church leaders. One thing I have learned so far in my Tenure Project research is that *church health strongly correlates with lengthy and healthy pastoral tenure*. One of the ways a church can help their ministers *stay put, stay healthy, and stay focused on their call* is through wise implementation of a sabbatical policy.

A sabbatical is not the same as a vacation. Hopefully your church provides ample paid vacation time to the pastor and staff. If not, you should. But a sabbatical is different. It is *a period of time in which the minister is relieved from his normal duties with pay in order to renew and grow for future ministry*. It involves rest, but the primary purpose is to provide a growth opportunity the minister otherwise would never get. It renews him or her personally and professionally so that, post-sabbatical, the minister is better at ministering.

Obviously this is good for the minister, but don't you see that it is also advantageous for the church? Your pastor and staff get used up and burned out. Personal renewal and development often get lost in the busyness of ministry. You should give serious thought to a "professional development leave" policy for your church – *for your own good!* The flock that blesses its shepherds in turn blesses itself.

I understand that churches do not want to be without their pastors and staff ministers for a lengthy period of time. It can present problems: Who will preach for us? How will decisions get made? Who will take care of the flock? Who will fill that leadership role? How will we bear the cost of paying for supply preachers and other fill-ins while we're still paying regular salaries? These are legitimate questions, but with some planning and with the partnership of your association all of these issues can be addressed. A little disruption of routine is a small price to pay for a minister who returns invigorated and better equipped. Church, think of "professional development leave" as an investment you make in your own future.

(By the way, don't just take my word for it. See what Lifeway and the Tennessee Baptist Convention have learned about sabbaticals and the benefits for both pastors and churches. Read here <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/pastor-ministry-guidelines-successful-sabbatical-vacation> and here <http://www.tnbaptist.org/page.asp?page=105> .)

In "Sabbatical, part 2" I'll share some guidelines for developing a sabbatical policy in the local church. In the meantime thank you, Bluebonnet Baptist Association, for thinking enough of your Executive Director to provide for a sabbatical. It will be good for me and good for the association's future, too. I pray that the same forward-thinking wisdom will prevail in your church.