

A Reflection on Sabbatical

**Alasdair MacDougall – Liberty Church
(December 2022)**

Becoming a Sabbath Community: A Guide for Churches

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“This is the first day of my sabbatical. I am excited and anxious, hopeful and fearful, tired, and full of desire to do a thousand things.” Henri Nouwen, *Sabbatical Journey* (p3)

These words of Henri Nouwen, written in his diary on the first day of his final sabbatical, echoed strongly for me as I began my own sabbatical. If I’m being honest, I’d like to highlight and underline the ‘tired’ part, and temper the ‘full of desire to do a thousand things’, but overall it captured my feeling as I embarked on my recent sabbatical. I had a plan of how to spend my time, but didn’t quite know what to expect or what would come of it. Having now finished it, I can say that it was immensely valuable – personally, spiritually, intellectually, and in terms of family and ministry capacity. I’ll get to some of my reflections around that shortly, but first let me share some of my journey.

My Context

I’ve been in some form of vocational ministry for over 15 years, and for 10 of those years I’ve been in full-time ministry – often consisting of part-time church and chaplaincy roles across the week. In that time, I’ve been blessed to be part of a very supportive and encouraging church – Liberty Church of Christ – but those years have not been without some significant challenges. There are the ‘everyday’ challenges around discipleship, church growth, governance, personalities, finances, politics, and preferences, as well as the larger challenges that we thankfully don’t face too often.

Keith Farmer frames the complexity of ministry beautifully in his book, *Going Deeper to Go Further*.

I’ve found ministry to be a greatly fulfilling experience, but the challenges leave a mark. More recently, COVID has brought unprecedented (are we tired of that word yet?!) change and pressure to church life. On top of all of the regular tasks and duties, there were the added pressures of interpreting legislation, battling differing views on the pandemic, financial pressures, and the paradigmatic shift that church services underwent as many moved online. I am grateful to God for His providence throughout this period, and I can honestly say that we have been blessed at Liberty Church to have been able to navigate the time with minimal impact (as minimal as possible, in a global pandemic). Yet for me it left an already tired pastor feeling utterly worn out – worn out and on a trajectory to burn out (which I reluctantly admit now, post-sabbatical). I hadn’t fallen out of love with the church, I wasn’t going through a spiritual desert, but man was I tired. Tired in so many ways, and I’d noticed it starting to come out in certain contexts or conversations. It was time for a break.

So in January this year, my wife and I decided that it was time to take some extended leave. After speaking with my Eldership and getting their blessing, we booked a trip to the UK where we would spend three weeks travelling as a family and 10 weeks studying at Tyndale House, a residential biblical studies research library in Cambridge. Three-and-

a-half months of sabbatical leave, physically separated from ministry, with structures in place so that I could truly disconnect, rest and refuel.

Confession Time

Before I get to my reflections (I promise, I'll get there soon), I do need to make a confession. Until recently, I had a flawed view of sabbatical. If you had asked me how to define it, I would've told you it's the holiday a pastor takes when they need to either build the courage or create the separation to leave their role; or it's a treatment for burnout. For many years this, truth-be-told, is how I viewed sabbaticals. Sure I understood the biblical basis for them and the well-researched benefits. I wasn't against them, and admired people able to take them. However, if I'm being honest, I'd often viewed them as something to be undertaken when close to burnout or wanting to leave a church or job. In reality I hadn't, although I've known the theory behind them, seen them as being an opportunity for renewal. For me, they were a reactive tool when things got uncomfortable, rather than a proactive tool to equip and enable me to go deeper in ministry.

That was until recently. When we decided to take a longer break, initially I referred to my leave as 'taking a break' or 'study leave', as I was much more comfortable with that framing. However, over time I became more at-ease with calling it what it was: sabbatical leave. As I reflect now on what I have gained over this time, I have to say that I'm sold on their value. With that journey in mind, let me share some of my reflections from my sabbatical experience, and why I believe sabbatical rhythms are so important for ministry life and health.

Some Reflections:

Forced disconnect – A sabbatical forces us to disconnect in a healthy way. I'm yet to meet a pastor who does less than is required of them. When we're in ministry we're (hopefully) there because we love the church and we want to see it flourish. Our lives can become so enmeshed with church life as we minister within our community; another layer is added to this when we live in close proximity. Sabbatical leave forces us to place a separation between ministry and the rest of life, and this disconnect is healthy for us to be replenished and refreshed.

Everybody's context is different, but for my family this was particularly important. We live on-site, which makes for a great commute but blurry lines of separation. Going to the UK meant physical separation, a change of time zone, and functionally it meant that I was 'unavailable'. I often struggle when on smaller durations of leave to avoid getting pulled back into work (practically or at least mentally – perhaps you can relate?), so being functionally unavailable was so valuable.

Personal faith responsibility – A sabbatical offers an opportunity to find spiritual rhythms that aren't centred around our ministry activity. What do we do when we're not obliged to be at church on a Sunday? What do we read when we don't have to prepare sermons for a few months? How do we pray when we're not caught up in the pressure, politics and practice of ministry? These are all questions that a longer sabbatical encourages us

to wrestle with as we step off the ministry treadmill and shine a spotlight on our spiritual health.

I consider myself incredibly blessed to spend time in the Scriptures and prayer each week as I prepare for a sermon, Bible study, prayer meeting etc. Being completely disconnected from many of those things has forced me to more intentionally engage devotionally with the Word and prayer. My prayers have become more relational (just talking with God) rather than task or outcome-driven. My family and I have also had to consciously make the decision to attend church during this time. This might sound strange, but it has been such a blessing to be able to choose to go to church.

More busy, less efficient – Stepping back from ministry activity and having a chance to reflect without being immersed, we get to weigh just how productive we are. My hunch is that for many of us in ministry, we are busier than we would like to admit, and less efficient than we realise. Some of this is around schedule management, but I think it also has to do with the hurry that so easily creeps into ministry and life. The consequence of this, of course, is that we feel more stressed and get less done.

This is certainly true for my context. If I'm being honest, I regularly underestimate my busyness and exaggerate my efficiency and effectiveness – not out of ill-intent but because I want to maximise my potential contribution, and yet in trying to do more I split my focus in an unhealthy way. Taking a step back has allowed me (and my wife) to evaluate this and acknowledge some of the contributing pieces to this.

Slowing down is hard, but worth it – How well do we slow down? Sabbatical leave forces us to step back, slow down and escape the hurry of everyday ministry. It's a chance to go to the river, not to fill our water bottle to rush back to whatever we were doing, but to rest, observe, listen and 'be' rather than 'do'. Slowing down is a great reminder that we are more than what we achieve, and God values us firstly as His child.

I have family that live a significant distance away, and when I travel to and from them I will spend about five hours driving at 110km per hour. This speed is great, but when I slow down to 60km per hour at the end it feels so incredibly slow. When we live life at 110km per hour, slowing down is hard. It feels unnatural, it feels like I'm not being productive, and it feels hard. I find myself wanting to go fast, but in reality we can't live at that speed all the time – it isn't sustainable. In life, we have to be able to slow down. My reflection is that the longer we spend at 110km per hour, the more unnatural it feels to slow down. This is why a sabbatical rhythm is so important.

This was made abundantly clear to me during our time in Cambridge, where the majority of people cycle or catch the bus. Traffic can be awful, and parking is non-existent. When we arrived in Cambridge I had the option of cycling 15 minutes from our accommodation to the library, or walking 50 minutes. I chose (as much as the weather would permit) to walk. At the beginning of our trip I had great plans to listen to podcasts and do language revision while I walked – to make the most of my walking time. By the end I was simply listening to Christian worship music. I felt the lived value of 'being' rather than 'doing'. It wasn't about being as productive as I could, it was about consciously slowing down and

spending time with God and in my own thoughts. Getting to the library wasn't a task to be endured or a problem to solve, but a time to be savoured.

A time to re-calibrate – A sabbatical gives us a blessed and unique opportunity to reflect on different elements of life and ministry, with space and freedom to process well. Because a sabbatical is more than a vacation, it isn't just about 'switching off' but about intentionally resting, being refreshed and re-calibrating. It's difficult to fully evaluate ministry life and patterns (especially regarding our own ministry and spiritual health) when we're in the midst of ministry busyness. Sabbaticals offer us a chance to step back and evaluate with perspective, in order to equip and refresh us to continue in ministry for the long haul.

I've found that it's been an amazing opportunity to step back, without pressure, and evaluate my life and ministry. My wife and I have been intentional about this as we've put together a list of things to 'keep/change/discard' coming out of our time. Working through this has been so helpful and valuable for us personally, but my belief is that it will be beneficial for the church too as we re-engage in ministry with healthier patterns.

In Whom do we find our rest – Life and ministry have pressures and challenges, big and small, that tire us out and drain us. Christian ministry has in fact always been difficult for various reasons, and that isn't likely to change (if you think your church is difficult now, imagine pastoring the Corinthian church!). So how do we cope? How do we persevere and keep building the Kingdom? Where do we find rest? Rather, in Whom do we find rest? A sabbatical is a fantastic reminder that we find rest in our life-giving Saviour, who is at work in us and through us to achieve His purposes.

I'm reminded here once again of John 15:1-17, the vine and the branches. One of my key reflections over the last few months has been that the faster we go in life, the harder it gets to stay connected to the vine. Yet we know that when we minister separated from Jesus we're doomed to fail, fall or flee. Sabbatical is an opportunity to consciously slow down, connect or even re-connect with our Saviour, be renewed as we rest in Him, and re-enter into ministry with refreshed vitality and strength that comes from a deepening relationship with our Saviour.

It's not all about me – Sabbaticals remind us that the church can and will continue to function without us. That's not to say that Pastors don't have a God-given and biblical role in the church, rather that its success and failure doesn't hinge on us. It is a body of believers, with each person called to serve according to their gifts. It functions best when people are empowered, trust in leadership is exercised, and people are given an opportunity to serve with their gifts. Sabbaticals are a great (and humbling) reminder that the world keeps spinning and the church keeps going even when we're not there for a while.

In preparing for my sabbatical leave and then being away for an extended time, we as a church had to grapple with questions like who would fill gaps, what was essential to run, what were the structures that would allow things to continue in the best way. This, I believe, was actually a really healthy exercise and it's been so encouraging to see people step up to help and contribute to the ministry of the church.

A gift to the family – Families wear a lot more ministry-toll than we often like to acknowledge. The nights out, the extra work outside of hours, the urgent evening calls, the missed meals together, the events and activities that the family are expected to attend, even the Easter and Christmas realities of having to alter family plans to fit with church plans – it's not necessarily wrong, but it certainly adds up. Sabbaticals are a gift to the whole family as they allow the family to be together without any expectations or obligations.

We were so blessed to be able to adventure together, to have every dinner together, to sit together in church for the whole service, to have our activities driven by priority rather than urgency, and generally to have healthy margins around family life. I know that this isn't always the reality of everyday life, and largely that's ok (presuming there are healthy boundaries). But it was such an incredible, life-giving blessing to genuinely be present and together as a family for that time. Our sabbatical has truly been a blessing to the whole family, not just to me.

Sabbaticals don't solve everything – My final reflection is that a sabbatical doesn't solve all the problems we're facing, untangle all the confusion, or answer all our questions. It doesn't deal so much with our circumstances as it does with our faith, heart, health and relationship with God. Sure, it's a great time to reflect on what might need to change or be discarded, and it's certainly a valuable time to weigh up heavier questions prayerfully without distraction or outside pressure. But it isn't going to solve all the problems or challenges we face in ministry. What it does is give us perspective and a chance to be reminded about who we worship, why we serve Him, and what our ultimate goal is in ministry: to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

These are some of the reflections I've had from my sabbatical experience, and while they are just that – my reflections – my hunch is that there are probably pieces within them that resonate for others in ministry. Certainly that's my prayer. While I may have been a little reluctant to call my time a sabbatical at first, that is what it has been and it's been such an incredible blessing. I can say with absolute conviction that taking a sabbatical has been an enriching, equipping, and encouraging exercise, and I would recommend anyone who has been in ministry long-term consider taking one.