

A Reflection on Sabbatical

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Becoming a Sabbath Community: A Guide for Churches

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I started ministry in 2006 as a part-time English pastor at a Korean church. During my first appointment, I completed my Bible college studies, got married, had three children and was ordained as a Korean Presbyterian minister. That term ended in April 2013 when the church and I decided that our paths were moving separately, which led to planting our church – The Chapel Sydney – in May 2013.

Over the past 10 years, I have juggled ministry, worked to support the family, added two children, started a second church campus and endured a season of COVID. Pretty full on. However, one of the things that we had planned many years ago was that I would take an extended sabbath around our 10-year mark. So, at the nine-and-a-half-year mark, the church granted me six months of sabbath leave. I left the church and ministry in the capable hands of our staff team and board and embarked on a six-month journey outside my church.

Before I share some of my reflections on what was good and what could have been better, three weeks back into church and ministry I feel fresh, satisfied and excited. I am so grateful to our church community and leadership for allowing me to take this time to reflect and renew my soul. But definitely, there are many tips on how to have a good sabbatical. Here are a few of my tips.

Schedule it early

We scheduled this six-month sabbatical early in our church plant journey. It's not something that you can just bring up for next year's plans. It needs to be flagged early so that the church can prepare for it, whether it be financially, in support or in ministry. Everyone knowing that I would take six months off around our 10-year mark helped with planning things around the church and its staffing.

Know what season you are in (and the church's as well)

Initially, we were going to hit our 10-year mark and then take six months off, but we felt that taking the sabbatical before our 10-year mark would help the church and its schedule. Also, I was in a season where I could take time off from all types of work, and it wouldn't affect my children's education. The church was in a position where we had staff and leaders to lead the church during my absence, something that was not there even two years ago.

Plan it thoroughly

My supervisor and I spent six months planning my sabbatical. We spent time identifying what I was aiming to achieve, what I needed and where I would like to be at the end of the six months. We identified six key areas that then helped me shape what the six months would look like. Get help from someone to put your sabbatical together. Because the plan was there, during the six months I never once had to ask what was next or what do I do now.

Communicate well

We let our church know my plans and schedule for the time away. This led to great accountability and protection from my leaders for myself and my family. The expectations were clear on what the church should expect from me during this time and who they needed to contact for different things.

Give God plenty of space

It wasn't just spending time with God but allowing God to be wholly integrated into all areas of the sabbatical. God was everywhere – whether in morning devotions or while I travelled around the world. Giving God space to speak and reveal was so important. God showed up in some pretty significant ways. Good God surprises.

Was it perfect? Nope. Here are some things I would have done differently (learned for next time).

Same rhythm as my family

My wife, also a pastor at the church, was not on sabbatical, which meant that we were running at two different speeds during this time. Looking back, she was needed at the church, and I needed to be released, but we had difficulty balancing this out. Next time, hopefully, the church will be in a season where we can both take time off.

Re-entry

In the original schedule, the last month was dedicated to re-entry into church and ministry. However, there was an opportunity for our family to travel overseas, and we felt that this was from God. We had a great time overseas, but it meant that I was right back into the thick of things the week we returned. In the first seven days of returning, there was a funeral, a wedding and a baby born in the church. Having a few weeks dedicated to re-entry helps to re-climatise without the pressure of ministry.

Greater input in some other areas of my life

While I had a supervisor to lead and guide me through the six months, looking back, it would have been a great opportunity to have more input into different areas of my life. For example, to get some counselling or skills training – things that usually get overlooked in the busyness of daily life. Just a little opportunity has gone begging.

Some great advice I received about taking an extended sabbath was to make sure you plan for your next one when you finish. That's definitely in the works.