

# Why Sabbatical Leave?

**Becoming a Sabbath Community:** A Guide for Churches

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*I can state without wavering that the single greatest need of the church today is the restoration of ministers. What is required is a quite different approach to their life and work. It is a matter of leading them into a massive shift of the dynamics of their personality under God, and one that cannot be done by more books and conferences. They need to be taken out of the circulation for a sufficiently long time to re-vision and re-structure their lives in communion with Jesus and his kingdom. – Dallas Willard*

The health of a church is directly linked to the health of its leaders. For this reason, Conference Executive has directed significant investment to be made in the area of Leader Health across our network. A team of practitioners is now in place to serve, equip and support our leaders to be ministering from a place of health and vitality as they serve and lead the local church.

Much wisdom has recently been collated in this area and these resources are designed to guide you and your church community into the life-giving rhythms and practices of sabbath-keeping and sabbatical leave. Note that this sabbath rhythm of life is for all followers of Jesus, not just for those in paid ministry. As such, our hope is that your whole community can take this journey together, encouraged and affirmed by the Board or Eldership, modelled and taught by the Pastoral Ministry Team, and adopted and celebrated together by the whole community.

This rhythm of life – in community, with a focus on God and his goodness and provision – will be attractive to those who witness it and encounter the church in action. This is about the church living in a rhythm that is counter-cultural to the world around us. It is a world that preaches an incessant pursuit of more – more experiences, more wealth, more power, more affirmation – but we can say ‘no’ to this way of living and simply stop. In stopping, we bring our attention to God and his blessings, provision, beauty, presence and gifts. We recalibrate our lives – every week – to experience the truth that the world can get by without us, that there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and that my reality is that I live in the safe and secure kingdom of God.

Sabbatical leave is an intentional stepping away from the regular work and demands of pastoral ministry for the sake of connecting with our triune God for an uninterrupted period of time.

Taken from a paper produced by Dr. Keith Farmer, the following is an outline of the current climate that many Australian church pastors and leaders are facing. Keith has mentored and connected with a wide range of Australian church leaders over the past two decades and has a unique and concise picture of the state of leader health, the challenges facing our leaders, and the lack of healthy rhythms designed to give life to our ministry (and our lives in general).

In the following extract from Keith’s paper, [“The Healing Process from Emotional Depletion”](#), he provides a path forward, drawing on the biblical narratives and rhythms evident in scripture.

# The Healing (Recovery) Process from Emotional Depletion

## Introduction:

In the book "Going Deeper to go Further" I presented that Emotional Depletion (Burnout) is a significant factor detracting from Christian leaders' well being and sustainability in ministry. I sought to establish that this was a symptom of the deeper dilemma of undeveloped Christian discipleship (i.e. Christian character) as the foundational contributor, along with other contextual and cultural issues.

My hope in writing was that there would not only be a consciousness raising about the dilemma but that we would be motivated to 'build some fences' at the top of the emotional depletion cliff and also forewarn prospective sufferers.

However, I did not deal in any systematic or detailed way with how recovery can best be facilitated when there is already a significant level of depletion.

The assertion that a deeper Christian character through discipleship maturation is pivotal to recovery from burnout leads therefore to the encouragement that Christian leaders become more intentionally and deeply involved in whatever will facilitate the further development of Christ likeness. I have attempted to elucidate the what, why and how of this Christian character formation in an already written addendum to the book. Accessed through [keith.marg@bigpond.com](mailto:keith.marg@bigpond.com)

This paper follows and seeks to address the healing process on the bases already presented in the book and the addendum re: character based leadership. It must be stated up front that there does not seem to be any quick and/or easy recovery from emotional depletion. Just as the path into this pit is usually long, slow and almost imperceptible till it reaches a debilitating level, so the journey out is usually slow, or very gradual. However, there are some very important principles and practices that have been shown to reliably contribute towards recovery.

## Recovery through Prayer and Other Spiritual Resources:

Prayer is a major healer of the soul and therefore we are encouraged to pray for and help the emotionally depleted, including when they cannot pray for themselves.

There will always be a 'creator' aspect of recovery from emotional depletion (or any hurt or injury) in that there is a natural healing capacity for emotional life (as there is for physical injury or depletion) given that our human stewardship provides the right conditions for that healing, or doesn't have in place contextual factors that work against the natural process of healing. (I will return to this shortly).

“Going deeper to go further” emphasizes that the capacity to be healthy as a Christian leader depends significantly on ‘going deeper’ in our intimate and organic relationship with God as a passionate follower of Jesus. The ‘fruit of the Spirit’ which grows in our lives as we open ourselves more and more to going deeper, produces the personal capacities and relational capacities to be resilient and healthy.

This spiritual resource will always be the key power and capacity in the recovery from emotional depletion. However, as expressed above, there is a human stewardship opportunity and responsibility in the recuperation process that the Christian leader can embark upon and be committed to.

It is my understanding that there are key principles, processes and strategies to facilitate this difficult and usually quite slow and lengthy process of recovery.

## **Recovery Through Applying Biblical Wisdom and Christian Stewardship:**

Accepting the wisdom and value of resources commended above, there are very important Biblical teachings and principles that are relevant to recovery from Emotional Depletion which can be acknowledged and harnessed with great value.

These arise from the conviction we have as Christians that God is our creator and that He loves and values His creation and wants it to thrive. Our Creator, because He loves His creation deeply shares in scripture the basic ways in which we can experience ‘life to the full’ (John 10:10) or live healthily and sustainably. It is worth taking a short sideways step here to reinforce how important it is in contemporary Western culture to acknowledge God as creator and therefore the most highly qualified consultant on how to live well – particularly in the areas of relationship and morality.

Indeed to recognize and communicate with good sound reasoning, that Christian moral principles and guidelines are so that relationships and individuals will have the best chance of thriving in a world riddled with brokenness and hurt. This means that what are presently considered antiquated, discriminatory Christian moral laws are a loving heavenly father encouraging all of us to humbly accept our limitations and missteps (sins), and with His help seek to love our neighbour as ourselves. Having largely lost the impact of any Christian meta narrative our Western societies have been drifting (or faster) towards subjective, inadequate, often hypocritical approaches which look like a very selective new pietism.

It is therefore crucial that when difficulties and pain such as Burnout are a reality, we ask ‘what rhythm/s of God’s good creation has been overlooked or rejected? One important principle for healthy created life is the Biblically expressed practice of ‘sabbath rest’. This was briefly emphasized in the “Going Deeper to go Further”.

This is almost “without this nothing else” basic principle and practice for recovery from emotional depletion. Because my understanding of the nature of and key contributor to burnout uses the analogy of a tank, it is important for leaders to be able to discern what are their most likely ‘drainers’ and what are their most effective ‘fillers’ or ‘revivers’. Rest is the primary reviver. This is God’s design for healthy living.

The rest we know as sleep has a primary role of recovery or revival. Without this rest, which is designed to be about one third of our existence, all manner of difficulties and diminutions of life and the quality of life occurs. I have become aware through mentoring that maybe up to half of Christian leaders experience broken or inadequate sleep regularly (two or more nights per week). This adversely effects quality of life, work and relationships. Regularly this inadequate rest comes out of high levels of stress.

But ‘rest’ in the ‘sabbath’ sense is much wider and deeper than sleep. It may even have the difficulty of sometimes seeming to have contradictory elements. For example, rest does not necessarily mean inactivity. Worship of God is a highlighted Biblical human involvement which has an inherently uplifting, rejuvenating, tank filling result. To an extent rest is stopping doing what is draining you and replacing it with what energizes you.

There is a capacity for ‘rest’ which lies underneath even what we have said about it so far. It is the capacity which many leaders have not acknowledged as of crucial importance and often don’t know how, or just can’t, attain that state. In Biblical terms it is akin to the concept of ‘peacefulness’ or rest of the soul. It is attained by a deep inner security that allows us to be OK when we are not achieving any thing that can be recognized or valued by the other or the outside world. It is a spiritual resource that comes through Christian maturity.

The God fashioned natural healing and restoration that comes from ‘rest’ is foundational to recuperation. This means that it is usually important for the Christian leader to take ‘sabbatical leave’ from their ministry. As expressed in “Going deeper to go Further” a very important aspect of ‘sabbatical leave’ is that the leader does none of their normal ministry tasks during the sabbatical and there be a period of time to build up the emotional resources by concentrating on what fills them up emotionally while having minimal draining experiences.

As previously mentioned, formal recuperative processes such as those supervised by Work Cover normally have a graduated return to work responsibilities while counselling and other supports remain in place. In conjunction with the resources offered through Work Cover a mentor can be helpful during the recovery period as an encourager to keep spiritual disciplines and practices in place, including rest.

I have come to believe that for Christian leaders, because they are invariably highly motivated through a strong sense of call, it is really important that they not return to ministry too quickly because that sets back the recovery process significantly. The key to knowing the right time for a return to ministry is how the leader ‘feels’ about returning, and particularly about each of the major functions they will be returning to. For example,

I was asked recently by a pastor recovering from burnout when he should resume preaching. It sounds somewhat indulgent, but my answer was: "When you feel like it". If the person has to 'swallow hard' or 'take a deep breath' at the thought or mention of preaching, then they are not ready yet. This must be monitored very caringly, while encouraging a return to ministry.

## **A Summary of Resources which Help Recovery from Depletion and the Maintaining of Emotional Health:**

Having drawn attention to issues which are relevant to healing or recovery, these are important emphases and actions for emotional restoration and health.

- 1.** Openness to the work of God's Spirit within, bringing maturity of character in order to become more resilient.
- 2.** Recognise the pivotal role of prayer in opening up the opportunity for God's power and wisdom, including his miraculous healing power, to bring healing and work everything together for good. The prayer emphasis may need to be primarily by those surrounding the depleted leader because as previously mentioned, prayer is often difficult in the midst of burnout.
- 3.** Ensuring that our values, beliefs and commitments, are deeply Christian so that what we are committed to is in line with the way God created us to live. We need to note here that one of the strongest teachings of Jesus was that these commitments e.g. those expressed in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7), are strong and not half hearted – we cannot serve God and money for example.
- 4.** "Travel light" was one of Jesus' instructions to His disciples. The capacity to 'shake the dust off your feet' (Matt 10:14b NIV) and move on through forgiveness (both given and received) is crucial to staying healthy emotionally. Strong emphases on gratitude and humility aid this travelling light.
- 5.** Live in harmony with the God created need for 'rest' and its recuperative capacities.
- 6.** Recognise, value and actively participate in Christian community for support and accountability for self and others.
- 7.** Personally discern what are the more significant parts of life and ministry which drain you and those which energise you and make decisions which help to keep you 'fuelled and aflame' (Romans 12:11 "Don't burnout, keep yourselves fueled and aflame." (MSG)
- 8.** If already depleted and struggling, hold strongly to the belief that there is life and enjoyment beyond burnout and there is a likelihood that you will heal to be stronger and healthier than before.

9. Utilize good medical and societal resources to aid in the recovery process and the maintaining of health.
10. Know and recognise the key symptoms of emotional depletion, especially early signs e.g. withdrawal from people, and have a set of monitors or gauges to ensure you do not slip into or back into stress and depletion e.g. monitor sleep patterns.
11. Be patient if you are depleted and don't attempt to come back too quickly to what drains you.
12. A mentor can be helpful as an encourager and support, particularly in spiritual practices and disciplines including the practice of sabbath rest.

In conclusion, although health of emotional resources is only one part of 'living life to the full' it is an area which if not addressed and stewarded well, will affect many other areas of life e.g. relationships, intellectual functioning, physical health, spirituality. It is not the deepest part of us, but will be a good barometer as to what is happening and how healthy we are in the deepest areas i.e. our feelings will often be a good indicator of what is in our heart.

There are many Christian leaders, including me, who although acknowledging how painful burnout was, testify that it prompted a 'going deeper' which has been a great blessing to us and those to and with whom we have ministered.