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Answering Distress with Rest
How a Sabbatical Helps Pastors Recover from Distress

By
Philip Scott Kruis

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry.

Saint Louis, Missouri

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine how a pastor experiencing distress benefits from a sabbatical allowing them to remain in ministry. Pastors face multiple challenges in ministry, from manageable stress to unmanageable distress. Distress demands attention. Pastors and lay leaders must collaborate to secure a sabbatical for the pastor.

This study utilized a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews with eight pastors from various denominations who benefited from a sabbatical and remained in ministry after experiencing distress. The interviews focused on gaining data with three research questions: Identifying when stress has become distress, how pastors collaborate with lay leaders to secure sabbatical, and how sabbaticals benefit pastors so they stay in ministry.

The literature review focused on three key areas. 1) A biblical foundation for understanding distress and a review of recent literature on clergy burnout and occupational and psychological distress among clergy. 2) A biblical foundation for leadership collaboration and a review of recent literature pertaining to leadership collaboration within the church. 3) A biblical foundation of sabbath as it pertains to rest and a review of recent literature on best sabbatical practices that provide time for the pastor to rest and renew.

This study concluded that when collaborative leadership secures a sabbatical for a pastor who had been in distress, the benefits allow him to remain in ministry. Leaders collaborate to secure a sabbatical for pastors, considering the stakeholders and their interests. The study found that manageable stress became unmanageable distress due to a

defining moment such as a friend having a moral failure, to a buildup of stress at home and at work, and to conflicts with other ministry staff or lay leaders. Sabbaticals provide an extended time for the pastor to exit the day-to-day demands of ministry in order to be renewed, rejuvenated and restored. Much needed rest from labors allows for recovery, restful activities, and a healthy reentry to the ministry. The benefits of rest and restoration found in a sabbatical allow a pastor to reenter ministry with renewed vision and passion. Pastors experience distress. Every church should have a sabbatical policy in place for when theirs does.

To my best friend. You know who you are. Let's keep going!

He said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.”

Mark 6:31a

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Abbreviations

BOS	Burnout Syndrome
CODI	Clergy Occupational Distress Index
MBI	Maslach Burnout Inventory
PCA	Presbyterian Church in America
US	United States of America
VRBO	Vacation Rental By Owner

Chapter 1

Introduction

“Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble.” Job 14:1

Few of days and full of trouble. This is humanity’s universal experience ever since the fall in Eden. The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, an ancient Mesopotamian epic poem, describes the pain and suffering endured long ago. War, pestilence, disease, famine, and interpersonal conflict have been and will be everyday occurrences for most people on most of the globe most of the time. These experiences begin as stress and often become distress that must be managed to maintain mental, physical, and emotional health.

“Few of days and full of trouble.” In addition to life’s normal, daily stressors, Christians must bear the suffering that comes in following Christ.¹ The New Testament, replete with the challenges and persecutions that accompany having faith in him, normalizes the “not if but when” of Christian suffering. Jesus tells his disciples they will be hated by all for his name’s sake.² The Apostle Paul teaches that they should not be surprised when suffering comes upon them to test them.³ Fleeing violent persecution, early converts fanned out from Jerusalem into the surrounding regions.⁴ Christians suffer, sharing in the sufferings of Christ.⁵

¹ 1 Pet. 4:12-19.

² Matt. 10:28a, Mark 13:13a, Luke 21:17.

³ 1 Pet. 4:12.

⁴ Acts 8:1.

⁵ 1 Pet. 4:12, 13.

In their roles of leading, guiding, protecting, and instructing congregations in the Christian faith, pastors face even greater challenges, something neither new nor unexpected. For instance, James, the brother of Jesus, warns that those who teach will be judged more strictly.⁶ Jesus, speaking descriptively and prescriptively, told his disciples that to whom much has been given, much will be required.⁷ The writer of Hebrews cautions that church leaders will give an account for how they kept watch over the souls under their care.⁸

Such numerous, daily challenges have caused one pastor to comment, “The pastoral ministry is a pilgrimage through the wilderness.”⁹ Because of these and other cultural moment challenges, many pastors are reaching new lows in job satisfaction and new highs in discontent. Many are leaving ministry or operating at a diminished capacity.

The next few pages will briefly analyze the mix of this pressured context: the stressors pastors face, how the accumulation of stress moves pastors from stress to distress, and how a sabbatical can help heal pastoral distress.

⁶ James 3:1.

⁷ Matt. 25:29, Luke 12:48

⁸ Heb. 13:17

⁹ Zack Eswine, *The Imperfect Pastor : Discovering Joy in Our Limitations through a Daily Apprenticeship with Jesus* (Crossway, 2015), 150.

Stressors Pastors Face

A stressor is any event, situation, or external stimulus that causes a stress response in the body.¹⁰ The various stressors pastors face often overlap. Below are descriptions of eleven of the most common and weighty challenges to serving in the pastorate.

First, pastors are called to their office. All Christians experience the calling of God to be his adopted children. “In fact, the early Christian culture was so steeped in the construct of calling that the name ‘church’ is taken from the Greek word ‘ekklesia,’ which translated is the called-out ones.”¹¹

A pastor experiences this calling and a higher one. This divine, sacred calling points to vocational ministry—an acutely felt inward call to serve God in ministry. First felt by the pastor, this calling must then be affirmed by the church—by congregants and by the denominational or independent church leaders. This affirmation, while an honor, adds weight to the calling. Co-principle investigator at the Duke Clergy Health Initiative, Dr. Proeschold-Bell states, “When work is sacred, clergy might end up with a default approach in which everything is equally important, meaning that they are more likely to overwork and, at the same time, less likely to take care of their own physical and mental health.”¹² The sacred calling itself does not make it stressful. The pastor’s understanding and application of the calling makes it stressful.

¹⁰ Hana Ames, “Types of Stressors and When to Get Help with Stress,” MedicalNewsToday, December 19, 2023, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/types-of-stressors#physical>.

¹¹ Thomas R. Connors, “A Phenomenological Understanding of a Calling with Implications for Pastoral and Vocational Education,” *Doctoral Dissertations and Projects*, 2019, <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/doctoral/2301/>, 18

¹² Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell and Jason Byassee, *Faithful and Fractured: Responding to the Clergy Health Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 24

Second, a pastoral call leads to forced or chosen changes in ministry, which disrupt personal and family routines. Forced changes in ministry can cause pastors to question their calling. Chosen changes can be a testing of their calling. They often entail uprooting family, selling and purchasing a home, and moving to a new context. Such ministry context change disrupts the discipleship process, and the more significant the change, the more disruptive. Third is the duty of counseling. “Providing the effective leadership required to guide a congregation down a path of deep change is more challenging than it has ever been,”¹³ write leadership researchers Jim Herrington, Trisha Taylor, and Robert Creech. Pastors are often sought for counseling and are held responsible for the outcome. Though most pastors receive little training in counseling, the issues they address are complicated and longstanding. These issues include but are not limited to marital conflict, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, parenting issues, human sexuality, and financial troubles. A pastor not well trained in counseling may experience frustration due to incomplete knowledge, limited ability, or little or no change in the counselee. At times, the pastor offering counseling needs counseling as much as those he counsels. However, the cost of seeking counseling can put financial stress on pastors and their families, which compounds the stress.

People expect much more than just good sermons and helpful counseling from pastors. And, the diversity of expectations in pastors continues to rise. Proeschold-Bell reports that congregants expect their pastor to become all things to all people.¹⁴ One of

¹³ Jim Herrington, Trisha Taylor, and R. Robert Creech, *The Leader’s Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation*, Second edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2020), 10.

¹⁴ Proeschold-Bell and Byassee, *Faithful and Fractured*, 4.

the pastors interviewed in this study used the term “omni-competent” to describe this expectation. Pastors are expected to be available for them from the cradle to the grave, 24/7/365. And yet, they do not receive the same amount of care as members of their church. Paul David Tripp asks, “How is it that in many situations we have come to expect that the one leading the body of Christ can do well spiritually while getting less of ministry of the body of Christ than everyone he has to lead?”¹⁵

The expectation to meet all expectations comes not only from the church leadership and the congregants but often from the pastor himself. A high workload demands the exertion of extra energy, and no one feels this more keenly than the pastor. Ordained minister and the founder-director of Leaders that Last Ministries, Alfred Ellis, notes, “Overcommitted leaders will eventually burn out physically and/or emotionally. A committed, hardworking leader needs the board’s support in creating more balance and margin in his or her life.”¹⁶

Female pastors face the added stress of serving in a role traditionally reserved for men. Althea Truman explains, “The clergy has been known to openly reject women, and whereas a societal voice invites them to participate in organizational functions and become leaders, an invisible patriarchal force combined with a formidable religious controversial force wrestles their leadership.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Paul David Tripp, *Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 79.

¹⁶ Alfred Ellis, *The Resilient Leader: How Adversity Can Change You and Your Ministry for the Better* (Colorado Springs, CO, U.S.A: David C Cook, 2020), 79.

¹⁷ Althea W Truman, “The Lived Experience of Leadership for Female Pastors in Religious Organizations,” *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* 5, no. 2 (2011): 120–21.

Pastors of multiethnic churches face their own challenges. Some face rejection from family and friends because they have sought to serve multiple ethnic groups. Many pastors of multiethnic churches face financial stressors, along with expectations of having high cultural intelligence score. Congregants expect them to relate well to all the ethnicities to whom they minister and thus be skilled in sorting through complicated leadership decisions.¹⁸

Another key stressor for pastors involves the complexity of the job itself, which leads to rapid task switching and unpredictability of daily responsibilities. Task switching is the ability to shift attention between one task and another. It is related to cognitive control, and many occupations demand a high level of task switching. Many pastors enjoy this aspect of their work. It includes diverse duties and responsibilities using the various gifts of the pastor. Some pastors, however, demonstrate limited ability to switch tasks, leading to increased stress. The stress born by the demand to gain competence in task switching runs high for pastors as they attempt to handle the unpredictability of the job.¹⁹ Competing tasks, distracting tasks, prioritizing tasks, the diversity of tasks, the required stability to complete tasks, and the necessary flexibility to change tasks are just some of the factors built into task switching. With so many factors to consider, the pastor is expected to make instantaneous selections. Many appreciate using broad and deep resources in a diversity of tasks. However, others find the demands debilitating.

¹⁸ Mark DeYmaz and Harry Li, *Leading a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church: Seven Common Challenges and How to Overcome Them*, Leadership Network Innovation Series (Zondervan, 2010), 48.

¹⁹ Proeschold-Bell and Byassee, *Faithful and Fractured*, P. 2.

The public nature of the calling, the diversity of tasks, and the expectation to “get it right the first time” open the door for the stressor of regularly receiving criticism. “While not every pastor experiences serious criticism from his people in the first months of his ministry, every pastor will meet with it sooner or later,”²⁰ write Joel Beeke, President of Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary and Nicholas Thompson, a candidate for ordination in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Pastors take considerable time to develop thoughtful sermons each week. Not only must they read, take notes, and organize what they have studied into a written document; they must also publicly present the results of their study clearly and with heart. Widespread public criticism of these efforts is every leader’s worst nightmare.²¹

Pastors self-report that they face the high personal cost of perceived failure and internalized guilt over not doing enough. Cameron Lee, professor of Family Studies at Fuller Seminary and Judith Iverson-Gilbert, leadership coach and professional writer list the demands pastors face in ministry. These demands involve personal criticism along with presumptive expectation, boundary ambiguity, and family criticism.²² The pastor must absorb personal criticism and criticism of his family with humility and transparency, demonstrating acceptance while not alienating the critical congregants.

²⁰ Joel R. Beeke and Nicholas J. Thompson, *Pastors and Their Critics: A Guide to Coping with Criticism in the Ministry* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020), 14.

²¹ Ron Carucci, “How Leaders Should Handle Public Criticism,” *Harvard Business Review*, December 12, 2022, <https://hbr.org/2022/12/how-leaders-should-handle-public-criticism>.

²² Cameron Lee and Judith Iverson-Gilbert, “Demand, Support, and Perception in Family-Related Stress among Protestant Clergy,” *Family Relations* 52, no. 3 (July 2003): 249, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2003.00249.x>, 250.

Pastors must also exercise authority in the church. “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.”²³ The roles of pastors and elders, or church board, require that when the circumstances demand it, discipline and government must be exercised, spiritual power must be wielded, and the law of Christ must be enforced. This oversight is sometimes received well but not always. The pastor pursuing wayward sheep is often seen as meddling.

The many demands associated with the pastoral profession often require that pastors put in long hours at the office, visiting congregants, or in meetings. Michael Jenkins, a founding member of the Academy of Religious Leadership, stated in an article revealing findings from a study on clergy burnout, “Seventy-four percent of pastors responding to our survey reported that the greatest stress they experience relates to having ‘too many demands on their time.’”²⁴

Constant care for the needs of so many can become exhausting. Emotional, physical, and spiritual resources become depleted. Burnout is often just around the corner. Research indicates that of the three dimensions of burnout—emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment—emotional exhaustion is at the core.²⁵ Emotional exhaustion is directly related to demands and inversely related to the availability and quality of resources.

²³ Heb. 13:17.

²⁴ Michael Jenkins, “Great Expectations, Sobering Realities: Findings from a New Study on Clergy Burnout,” *Congregations* 28, no. 3 (May 2002): 12.

²⁵ Will Evers and Welko Tomic, “Burnout among Dutch Reformed Pastors,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 31, no. 4 (December 1, 2003): 329–38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009164710303100403>, 334.

Pastoral demands pull pastors in many directions, often away from personal life pursuits and towards the church. But pastors need to be physically active and maintain diet and exercise for their physical health, as well as pursue personal friendships for their social-emotional health.²⁶ “In our ever-evolving world of technology, social networking, and self-protection, we live increasingly fragmented, isolated lives. And yet, no one was created for isolation. We were fashioned by God for authentic relationships.”²⁷ Many of the pastors interviewed in this research mentioned loneliness as a stressor that led to distress. The loneliness shared by pastors derives from isolating as a defense mechanism and believing friendships in the church are discouraged.

Isolation occurs when pastors grow emotionally exhausted and are no longer able to cope with the stress. In addition, when faced with criticism or conflict from lay leaders and congregants, pastors withdraw. They find respite in disconnection which limits the pain and frustration they bear, rather than providing wisdom and encouragement, which would create more intimacy.

They have spouses and families who are their first flock, not their last. Maintaining intimacy within a marriage takes time and energy, energy that pastors run short on by the end of the day or week. Parenting also takes time and energy. Quality

²⁶ “Embrace a Healthy Lifestyle and Your Mind May Benefit: Diet, Exercise, and Stress Reduction Can Help Minimize the Risk of Cognitive Decline,” *Women’s Health Advisor* 28, no. 8 (August 2024), 5. Mark R McMinn et al., “Care for Pastors: Learning from Clergy and Their Spouses,” *Pastoral Psychology* 53, no. 6 (January 1, 2005): 563–81, 565. Charles Schaeffer and Frauke Schaeffer, *Trauma and Resilience, A Handbook* (Frauke C. Schaefer, MD, Inc, 2016), 109.

²⁷ Jimmy Dodd, *Survive or Thrive: 6 Relationships Every Pastor Needs* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2015), 73.

time cannot be found without quantity time, and a large quantity of time is often hard to find.²⁸

Congregations decline for one reason: people depart. Congregants either die, move away, or leave to attend another church or to deconstruct their faith. “Whenever we engage in relationships that are long-term, intense, and significant, we become emotionally connected to one another in an ‘emotional system,’ or a ‘living system,’”²⁹ write Herrington, Taylor, and Creech. American psychologist, author, and science journalist, Daniel Goleman, and his associates, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee add, “Whether an organization withers or flourishes depends to a remarkable extent on the leaders’ effectiveness in this primal emotional dimension.”³⁰ Unexpected departures can deeply affect the emotional health of the pastor. Grief does not skip over pastors. They keenly feel the losses, along with the losses that members of the congregation experience.

Measuring Stress

Two research instruments have proven helpful in determining levels of stress and distress: the Holmes-Rahe Life Stress Inventory and the Clergy Occupational Distress Index (CODI). The Holmes-Rahe Life Stress Inventory³¹ attributes point values for forty-

²⁸ Patrick Wanis PhD, “The Quality Time Myth – It’s Quantity Time That Matters ~ Patrick Wanis,” February 8, 2017, <https://www.patrickwanis.com/the-quality-time-myth-its-quantity-time-that-matters/>.

²⁹ Herrington, Taylor, and Creech, *The Leader’s Journey*, 96.

³⁰ Daniel Goleman, Richard E. Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership, With a New Preface by the Authors: Unleashing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*, 10th Anniversary edition (Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press, 2013).

³¹ Thomas H. Holmes and Richard H. Rahe, “The Social Readjustment Rating Scale,” *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* 11, no. 2 (August 1, 1967): 213–18, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-3999\(67\)90010-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-3999(67)90010-4).

three life events. The higher the point value of the event, the greater the stress from that event. The point values from all the stress-laden events occurring in the last year are totaled by subject. Low total scores reveal relatively low life change and low susceptibility to stress-induced health breakdown. Higher scores imply about a 50 percent chance of a major health breakdown in the next two years. Even higher scores raise the odds of a major health breakdown to about 80 percent.

The inventory includes personal events and events that happen to the people they know well. Pastors are present at the hospital when babies are born and at the bedside when people die—and for many significant life events in between. Stressors experienced by the congregation often raise the scores of pastors on the Life Stress Inventory.

Crossing the line from stress to distress occurs so frequently for pastors that the Clergy Occupational Distress Index (CODI) was developed in 2011.³² Mounting evidence indicates that occupational distress has a negative impact on clergy's health, ministerial career, and the functioning of their congregation. An instrument was needed to identify pastors experiencing occupational distress. The CODI measures the dimensions of occupational distress that negatively affect clergy health using five questions:

During the past year, how often have the people in your congregation made too many demands of you? During the past year, how often have the people in your congregation been critical of you and the things you have done? Looking back over the past year, how often have you experienced stress as a result of dealing with congregational members who are critical of you? Over the past year, how often have you felt lonely or isolated in your work? Over the past year, how often have you

³² Steven M. Frenk et al., "The Clergy Occupational Distress Index (CODI): Background and Findings from Two Samples of Clergy," *Journal of Religious Health*, no. 52 (March 16, 2011): 397–407.

experienced stress because of the challenges you have in this congregation?

The response categories are: “Never,” “Once in a while,” “Fairly often,” and “Very often.” Responses to the five questions led to the development of an index to assess the level of distress a pastor might be experiencing. The index also assists those treating pastors so they will overcome the distress and continue as clergy. The existence of this index indicates that pastors experience significant distress.

As researchers may not consider the stressors listed in the CODI in the same manner, symptoms of stress might be a better way to measure stress.

Stress Symptoms:

1. Mood symptoms consistent with depression or anxiety
2. Anger and irritability
3. Muscle tension in various places including shoulders, jaw, back
4. Cardiopulmonary arousal symptoms like a racing heart, irregular heartbeat, and rapid or difficult breathing
5. Sympathetic arousal symptoms like having trouble sleeping and sweating under pressure
6. Neurological symptoms like feeling dizzy and weak
7. Gastroenterological symptoms like nausea, stomach pain, and diarrhea
8. Cognitive disorientation symptoms like difficulty concentrating and making mistakes more often or thinking the same thought over and over

9. Upper respiratory symptoms like colds and having to clear your throat more often.³³

Proper assessment and diagnosis of the pastor's distress is critical to providing proper treatment for a good prognosis.

Moving from Stress to Distress

“The day-to-day stress of managing an institutional church—small or large—in the face of changes in their ministry context, occurring at breakneck speed, robs them of their personal spiritual vitality,”³⁴ according to Herrington. This is more than stress. It is distress.

Over time, the accumulation of everyday stress responses in the body and mind can erode our sense of well-being and lead to low mood and a feeling of being on edge all the time. That's when stress becomes distress. In addition, anticipatory anxiety—feelings of dread about a potentially stressful event in the future—contributes to distress.³⁵

Among the many factors leading from stress to distress is burnout syndrome (BOS). From her extensive research on burnout, Christina Maslach developed the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). Maslach reports that three axes measure burnout in any profession: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and

³³ Proeschold-Bell and Byassee, *Faithful and Fractured*, 75.

³⁴ Herrington, 9.

³⁵ www.newportacademy.com/resourcesmental-health/distress-vs-stress/

personal accomplishment.³⁶ “Compared with other human service professionals, the results show that pastors have relatively high scores on emotional exhaustion and relatively low scores on depersonalization. Pastors have relatively low scores on personal accomplishment.”³⁷ This means that, while pastors tend to have congenial attitudes and positive feelings toward their congregations, they are often dissatisfied with their accomplishments on the job.³⁸ Such scores on the inventory spell a formula for burnout.

Stress is universally experienced across the globe; it is unavoidable and is often managed successfully. Distress is less frequently experienced than stress, and it often presents challenges beyond people’s ability to manage. The stress-producing demands placed on pastors can be staggering. In addition to the above descriptions of challenges, pastors are expected to be dynamic preachers, compassionate counselors, capable administrators, bold visionaries, confident strategists, effective fund raisers, strong leaders, and much more.³⁹ Distress demands intervention or treatment. Unaddressed distress may lead to declining health, departure from the ministry, or even death (from poor health or suicide).⁴⁰

³⁶ Christina Maslach, Susan Jackson, and Michael Leiter, “The Maslach Burnout Inventory Manual,” in *Evaluating Stress: A Book of Resources*, vol. 3, 1997, 191–218.

³⁷ Evers and Tomic, “Burnout among Dutch Reformed Pastors,” 329.

³⁸ Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter, “The Maslach Burnout Inventory Manual,” 192.

³⁹ Christopher J Adams and Holly Hough, “Clergy Burnout: A Comparison Study with Other Helping Professions,” *Pastoral Psychology* 66, no. 2 (January 1, 2017): 147–75, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-016-0722-4>, 149.

⁴⁰ Andriy, “Managing Psychological Distress: Strategies for Mental Well-Being,” A Simplified Psychology Guide, February 14, 2024, <https://psychology.tips/psychological-distress/>.

Like the multiple layers of an onion, stressors can be found in layers in the life of the pastor. Examining one stressor reveals another stressor beneath it and another stressor beneath that one and so on. Or, like a cluster of grapes, stressors tend to cluster, growing to an unmanageable size, indicating distress. In their book titled *Resilient Ministry*, Bob Burns and Tasha Chapman respond to a pastor who claims that workaholism acts like a narcotic on him. The self-imposed demands, an inability to regulate work habits and an overindulgence in work is done to the exclusion of other life activities. Work-related stress levels for pastors run high, often without the resources to manage it well.⁴¹ Unmanageable stress is distress.

Using a Sabbatical to Heal from Pastoral Distress

The accumulation of stress rising to the level of distress demands attention. It demands sabbath rest. God has ordained one day in seven as a Sabbath, to be kept holy to him. At the conclusion of God's creational activity, God rested on the seventh day, granting something people can imitate: rest. God gave this day of rest and worship for holy rest, all the day, from work, words, and thoughts about worldly employments and recreations.⁴²

When does the pastor find rest? The most anticipated and expectation-laden aspect of the pastor's work, the sermon, takes place on this day of rest. Even more

⁴¹ Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2013, 77.

⁴² Westminster Assembly, *Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger & Shorter Catechisms, Sum of Saving Knowledge, Etc*, (Free Presbyterian, 1994). Chapter XXI. Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath Day.

important, when does the pastor get an extended period to recover from the constant demands of leadership, counseling, and caring?

Researchers Steinborn and Huestegge at the University of Wuerzburg in Wuerzburg, Germany, investigated the effect of rest breaks on performance, examining performance as a function of three factors: rest, time-on-task, and demand.⁴³ Their research found that “rest breaks (versus no rest) are beneficial for performance as these benefits increase with increasing time at work.”⁴⁴ The research also found that the benefit of rest was more pronounced the more difficult the task.

Bestselling author and keynote speaker on business and leadership, David Burkus, notes two important benefits of sabbatical: the employee gets to rest and recharge, and the organization is stress tested without the employee.

Whether it's a long-term sabbatical or a surprise vacation, the success of extended time off -- both for the employee and for the organization -- is an encouragement and a warning. The warning is that most organizations are probably not giving employees enough time away. The encouragement? Extended time off pays off.⁴⁵

Author, minister, and founder/director of Leaders that Last, Alfred Ells reports, “Establishing a sabbatical policy for the leader helps keep the leader’s vision fresh and prevents him or her from growing weary in doing good.”⁴⁶

⁴³ Michael B. Steinborn and Lynn Huestegge, “A Walk Down the Lane Gives Wings to Your Brain. Restorative Benefits of Rest Breaks on Cognition and Self-Control,” *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 30, no. 5 (October 9, 2016): 795–805, <https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.3255>, 796.

⁴⁴ Steinborn and Huestegge, 799.

⁴⁵ David Burkus, “Research Shows That Organizations Benefit When Employees Take Sabbaticals,” *Harvard Business Review*, 2024, 113–14.

⁴⁶ Ells, *The Resilient Leader*, 96.

Providing sabbatical for their pastor may be foreign to lay leaders. Many have heard of academic sabbaticals but not a sabbatical for the pastor. When discussions of a sabbatical arise, so do concerns. The cost to the congregation financially and the stress placed upon the system are great concerns. Once faced with the opportunity a sabbatical provides, lay leaders must still weigh the benefits against the costs. Do the benefits of a sabbatical for the pastor and the church outweigh the real and perceived costs to the congregation?

Purpose Statement

Many pastors experiencing distress, and the churches they serve, are often unaware they need help. Therefore, many pastors underutilize the resources available, including a sabbatical. In addition, many lay church leaders are not aware of the benefits of a sabbatical. The cost of these oversights is that many pastors experience burnout and leave vocational ministry. The purpose of this study is to explore how pastors who experience distress remain in pastoral ministry after receiving benefits from a sabbatical.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How do pastors identify that what they are experiencing has moved past normal stress to unhealthy distress?
2. How do pastors collaborate with lay leaders to secure a sabbatical for the pastors?
3. In what ways and to what extent do pastors benefit from the sabbatical for remaining in pastoral ministry?

Significance of the Study

The findings and conclusions of this study will benefit pastors experiencing distress, denominational leaders, the church boards or leadership teams who care for pastors, and congregants who need greater insight into pastoral distress and the benefits of a sabbatical. The study focused particularly on pastors who experienced levels of stress beyond the norm, to the point of distress. The research provides insight into the benefits of pastoral sabbatical to recover from distress.

Many pastors may not have the self-awareness to know when they have crossed the line from stress to distress. The demands of the calling and limitations on time keep pastors moving at a high pace while resources for maintaining mental, physical, and emotional health remain unknown, untapped, or insufficient. The common remedy of attempting to meet the many and varied expectations by increasing pace, which works for a while, eventually proves inadequate. Emotional exhaustion begins to set in, and then pastors slowly detach and isolate from the congregation and/or leadership. They begin to doubt ministry effectiveness and lean toward inadequacy. Pastors might not be self-aware and they might not be resource-aware either. Does their distress require additional resources? Where can they find additional resources to help them? How do they implement the resources required? How have others done this? Pastors reading this study will benefit from knowing they are not alone in their distress and that the rest provided by a sabbatical can prevent further distress and bring healing from current distress.

Denominational leaders will benefit as they grow in understanding of pastoral distress and as they seek means of supporting their pastors. For example, the denomination to which the researcher belongs looked to their provider of retirement and

benefits services for help. Recognizing that the benefits of taking a sabbatical are significant, that the financial implications of a sabbatical place an extra burden on pastors and churches, and because churches lack incentives to provide the pastor with extended time away, this denomination established a matching grant for pastors to take sabbatical.⁴⁷

Elder boards or leadership teams are often comprised of businessmen or salaried workers. They often haven't seen the practical benefits of sabbatical, and without understanding the benefits of a sabbatical, church leaders lack the incentive to grant extended time off. This study will provide proven results for these decision-makers.

Congregants will benefit from reading this study as well. They can learn how challenges move pastors from stress to distress and the restorative benefits of a sabbatical. While most congregants recognize the varied demands placed on pastors, many do not recognize when the stress moves to distress. The uniqueness of the calling leaves many congregants ignorant of their pastor's needs. Regardless of the terminology one uses to describe it, to many parishioners a sabbatical seems like a glorious vacation.⁴⁸

Definition of Terms

In this study, key terms are defined as follows:

⁴⁷ Chloe Latture, "Pastoral Sabbatical Matching Program Alleviates the Financial Burden of Sabbaticals," Geneva Benefits Group, July 31, 2024, <https://genevabenefits.org/pastoral-sabbatical-matching-program-alleviates-financial-burdens/>.

⁴⁸ Roger Kruger, "Rediscovering the Point: Congregational Sabbaticals," *Congregations* 30, no. 3 (2004): 6–9, 6.

Distress – extreme anxiety, sorrow, or pain.⁴⁹ Managing distress requires external help.

Lay leaders – men or women who have been ordained or commissioned by the governing authority in the local church.

Pastor - for the purposes of this study, the term ‘pastor’ is used to represent the primary preaching and leading pastor of the church. This term includes church planters, senior pastors, lead pastors, and solo pastors. At times, however, it may include associate and assistant pastors.

Sabbatical – any extended period in which the pastor steps away from the day-to-day practices of ministry in order to focus on spiritual development for the purpose of returning to the congregation having experienced rest and renewed energy for ministry.⁵⁰

Stress - A stressor is any event, situation, or external stimulus that causes a stress response in the body.⁵¹ Stress is personally manageable.

⁴⁹ “Oxford English Dictionary,” accessed August 15, 2024, <https://www.oed.com/?tl=true>.

⁵⁰ “Planning Sabbaticals : A Guide for Congregations and Their Pastors,” accessed November 14, 2024, <https://eds-p-ebshost-com.search.covenantseminary.edu/eds/ebookviewer/ebook/bmx1YmtfXzIyOTE4NzZfX0FO0?sid=6c65930d-c880-4b6e-ac93-7d63acbb60cd@redis&vid=5&format=EB&rid=2,3>.

⁵¹ Ames, “Types of Stressors and When to Get Help with Stress.”

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to explore how pastors who experience distress remain in pastoral ministry after receiving the benefits from a sabbatical. The literature review begins with a study on Bible passages to provide a biblical foundation for understanding distress, collaboration, and rest. In addition, three particularly relevant areas of literature were reviewed to provide a framework for the qualitative research. These areas focus on the literature concerning clergy distress, leadership collaboration, and sabbatical.

A Biblical Foundation for Understanding Distress, Collaboration, and Rest

A Biblical View of Distress

English versions of the Bible do not use the word “stress.” Distress, however, is mentioned often. The people of God frequently experience distress, and attention is first given to mentions in the Old Testament.

Distress in the Old Testament

Early in the biblical record, humanity sins, falls from grace, and enters a life of stress and distress: they “became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of soul and body.”⁵² The first man and woman, the “first parents,” attempt to

⁵² Assembly, *Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger & Shorter Catechisms, Sum of Saving Knowledge, Etc, Etc*. VI.2.

cover up their newly discovered nakedness, hide from their Creator and Friend, and blame-shift—acts consistent with escape from distress. In addition, God pronounces curses upon them, multiplying pain and toil.⁵³

Two primary word groups in Hebrew are translated as “distress,” *sara* and *metsuqah*. These word groups comprise most Hebrew expression of distress.⁵⁴

Sara

Distress, as represented by the Hebrew word group, *sara*, is defined as “to bind, be distressed, be in distress, be cramped, be narrow, be scant, be in straits, make narrow, cause distress, besiege.”⁵⁵ As Jacob anticipated meeting his estranged brother Esau, he was in great distress.⁵⁶ Israel was in severe distress when the Ammonites crossed the Jordan to fight against Judah, Benjamin, and Ephraim.⁵⁷ David experienced the crushing pressure of distress throughout his life. In Psalm 18 he describes his predicament as having no other options, no other end than certain death: “The cords of death encompassed me; the torrents of destruction assailed me; the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me.”⁵⁸

Metsuqah

⁵³ Gen. 3:7-19.

⁵⁴ “Morphology of Biblical Greek | Logos Bible Software,” accessed November 7, 2024, <https://www.logos.com/product/40498/morphology-of-biblical-greek>.

⁵⁵ “H3334 - Yāṣar - Strong’s Hebrew Lexicon (Esv),” Blue Letter Bible, accessed August 20, 2024, https://www.blueletterbible.org/esv/gen/1/1/s_1001.

⁵⁶ Gen. 32:7.

⁵⁷ Judg. 10:9.

⁵⁸ Ps. 18:4, 5.

Distress, as represented by the Hebrew word group *metsuqah*, is most often translated as “straightness, distress, anguish.” In Deuteronomy 28, Moses declares, “All these curses shall come upon you and pursue you and overtake you till you are destroyed, because you did not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes that he commanded you.”⁵⁹ Because of their disobedience, “The LORD will bring a nation against you from far away, from the end of the earth, swooping down like the eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, a hard-faced nation who shall not respect the old or show mercy to the young.”⁶⁰ At the hand of this nation, Israel will experience great distress.⁶¹

David uses *metsuqah* to describe his distress and the distress known by the redeemed of the Lord in many of his psalms.⁶²

Weeping as a Sign of Distress

In addition to explicit references to distress in the Old Testament, distress is also implied in episodes of weeping or lament. Lament, that passionate expression of grief, is often accompanied by mourning or weeping. The examples are too numerous to address, but a sampling follows. Abraham wept over Sarah’s death, Joseph wept over Jacob’s death, and the people of Israel wept over Moses’s death.⁶³ David wept for Absalom in 2 Samuel 19:1, and his penitential weeping fills Psalm 6. Ezra and the people of Israel wept

⁵⁹ Deut. 28:45.

⁶⁰ Deut. 28:49, 50.

⁶¹ Deut. 28:53, 55, 57.

⁶² Ps. 25:17, Ps. 107:6, 13, 19, 28.

⁶³ Gen. 23:2, 50:4; Deut. 34:8.

over their intermarriage with foreigners.⁶⁴ Job wept bitterly over the severity of his loss.⁶⁵

Isaiah describes the impact of the creation of the new heavens and the new earth will have on the people of the Lord in Isaiah 65:19 thus: “I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people; no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress.” Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, wept over the destruction visited upon the people of Israel.⁶⁶

Prayer and Crying out in the Old Testament

Following on the heels of the first murder in human history, people began to call upon the name of the Lord.⁶⁷ They prayed often, but some instances stand out more than others. For instance, Abraham drew near to God and bargained for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18:22-33. When Jacob was deeply distressed at the prospect of meeting his estranged brother, he prayed for deliverance.⁶⁸ When Israel fell into the hands of the Ammonites and every other oppressor endured in the time of the Judges, they cried out to the Lord for deliverance.⁶⁹ When David was distressed by the constant pursuit of his enemies and his king, he cried out for deliverance. In Psalm 4:1 he writes, “Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness! You have given me relief when I was in distress. Be gracious to me and hear my prayer!” In Psalm 18:6, David cries out in

⁶⁴ Ezra 10:1.

⁶⁵ Job 16:6.

⁶⁶ Jer. 9:1.

⁶⁷ Gen. 4:26.

⁶⁸ Gen. 32:9-12.

⁶⁹ Judg. 10:10.

his distress, “In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears.”

What did the Lord do when he heard the cries of his people? He answered. “For a people shall dwell in Zion, in Jerusalem; you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry. As soon as he hears it, he answers you.”⁷⁰

Having considered distress in the Old Testament, attention will now be given to distress in the New Testament.

Distress in the New Testament

A number of Greek words are translated as “distress” or “affliction.” In order of frequency of occurrence, they are *ananke*, *lypeo*, *stenochoria*, *ekthambeo*, *odynao*, *synoche*, *ademoneo*, *thlipsis* and *kataponeo*.

Ananke

Ananke carries with it the sense of distress due to necessity or pressure. In Luke 21, when Jesus foretells the destruction of Jerusalem, his description is foreboding, “Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people.”⁷¹ The Apostle Paul instructs the Corinthians to remain as they are, either single or married, “in view of the present distress.”⁷² This “present distress” refers to the urgency caused by living in light of Christ’s certain return or some difficulty afflicting Corinth. Paul responds to the good report Timothy has brought him of the Thessalonians faith and love, saying, “...for

⁷⁰ Isa. 30:19.

⁷¹ Luke 21:23.

⁷² 1 Cor. 7:26.

this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith.”⁷³

Lypeo

There are two uses of *lypeo* in the New Testament, and they describe the great distress the disciples experienced when Jesus foretells his death and resurrection and the distress the king’s servants felt when their fellow servant extorted money owed him in the parable of the unmerciful servant.⁷⁴

Thlipsis

Thlipsis and its synonym, *thlibo*, refer to affliction, pressure, tribulation, or narrowing in the New Testament. The literal meaning of *thlipsis* is illustrated by the penalty prescribed by ancient English law for those who refused to plead: they were pressed and crushed to death by heavy weights placed on their chests.⁷⁵ In the early chapters of his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul describes the universal condition of man in rebellion against God: tribulation and distress.⁷⁶

He expresses this crushing pressure as he reports on the affliction that characterized his missionary endeavor in 2 Corinthians 1:8, “For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.”

Stenochoria

⁷³ 1 Thess. 3:7.

⁷⁴ Matt. 17:23, 18:31.

⁷⁵ Richard Chenevix Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1989), http://archive.org/details/synonymsofnewtes0000tren_t7d9, 214.

⁷⁶ Rom. 2:9.

The word, *stenochoria*, refers to close confinement, lack of space or room, and the discomfort that results. Three out of the four times that *stenochoria* occurs in the New Testament, it is accompanied by *thlipsis*.

This sense is evident in 2 Corinthians 4:8a: “We are afflicted, *thlipsis*, in every way, but not crushed, *stenochoria*.”⁷⁷ In Romans 2:9 Paul says that both *thlipsis* and *stenochoria* would be the portion of the lost. “There will be tribulation, *thlipsis*, and distress, *stenochoria*, for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek,” In Romans 8:35, Paul summarizes the Christian hope: nothing can separate Christians from the love of God for his people in Christ Jesus, not even tribulation or distress. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, *thlipsis*, or distress, *stenochoria*, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?”

Finally, biblical leadership is accompanied by heightened responsibilities, greater scrutiny, and significant challenges. Moses served as God’s mouthpiece to the people of Israel while facing severe criticism from his fellow leaders, especially his brother Aaron and his sister Miriam. As David ascended to the throne as God’s anointed, he experienced distress at the hands of his enemies, including Saul.⁷⁸ Jesus taught of the greater responsibility and accountability that comes with greater knowledge and leadership, proclaiming, “Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.”⁷⁹ The Apostle Paul

⁷⁷ 2 Cor. 4:8a.

⁷⁸ Ps. 118, superscription.

⁷⁹ Luke 12:48.

experienced great distress during his ministry.⁸⁰ James 3:1 teaches that teachers will be held to a higher standard and face stricter judgment.⁸¹

Church leaders are expected to provide an account before God for their oversight of the flock, indicating a higher level of responsibility and challenge.⁸² When the Apostle Paul lists the qualifications for overseers in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, he emphasizes the high standards and exemplary behavior required of those in leadership.⁸³ The significant responsibility that church leaders bear as they oversee the flock and set a godly example before them is echoed by the Apostle Peter.⁸⁴ The high level of responsibility and authority placed on the pastor can lead to distress.

Weeping as a Sign of Distress

In addition to explicit references to distress in the New Testament, weeping implies situations with great distress. Instances of weeping due to distress in the New Testament are too numerous to address in full, but a sampling is provided. There was widespread weeping at Herod's command to kill all male babies under the age of two; Jesus lamented and wept over the distressful rebellion found in the city of Jerusalem.⁸⁵ He joined other mourners as they wept over the death of his friend, Lazarus.⁸⁶ When Jesus had been delivered up to be crucified, a multitude of people were mourning and

⁸⁰ 2 Cor. 11:16-28.

⁸¹ James 3:1.

⁸² Heb. 13:17.

⁸³ 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9.

⁸⁴ 1 Pet. 5:1-4.

⁸⁵ Luke 13:34.

⁸⁶ John 11:35.

lamenting for him.⁸⁷ Mary wept outside the empty tomb.⁸⁸ And, those who do not enter his rest will enter a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth.⁸⁹

Prayer and Crying out in the New Testament

As in the Old Testament, prayer and crying out often indicate distress. When Jesus faced the weariness and weight of ministry, he prayed.⁹⁰ As he hung on the cross, the greatest moment of distress in human history, he cried out to his Father.⁹¹ Peter and John and their friends lifted their voices together to God after being arrested and tried by their rulers and elders and scribes, along with the High Priest and all who were of the high priestly family.⁹² As Stephen was being stoned he cried out to the Lord.⁹³ When Peter was imprisoned by Herod after he had executed James, the church made earnest prayer to God.⁹⁴ Paul and Silas are cast into prison. And what did they do? They prayed and sang hymns to God.⁹⁵ When Paul was given a thorn in his flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass him, he pleaded with the Lord three times that it be taken away.⁹⁶

⁸⁷ Luke 23:26, 27.

⁸⁸ John 20:11.

⁸⁹ Matt. 8:12, 13:42, 50, 22:13, 24:51, 25:30; Luke 13:28.

⁹⁰ Mark 1:35.

⁹¹ Luke 23:46.

⁹² Acts 4:23-30.

⁹³ Acts 7:59-60.

⁹⁴ Acts 12:5.

⁹⁵ Acts 16:25.

⁹⁶ 2 Cor. 12:8.

When the people of God experienced distress in both the Old and New Testaments, they cried and they cried out. Those in distress sought help. After considering the biblical concept of distress, attention will now be given to the concept of collaborative leadership found in the Scriptures.

A Biblical View of Collaborative Leadership

The Bible offers numerous examples of collaborative leadership. Aaron acted as Moses' spokesperson and supported him in leading the Israelites out of Egypt.⁹⁷ Joshua and Caleb worked together to encourage the Israelites to trust in God's promise to enter the Promised Land.⁹⁸ Though Jonathan was the son of King Saul, he supported David and helped him navigate the challenges of being a future king.⁹⁹ Jesus equipped his disciples to share in his mission, demonstrating a model of leadership through collaboration.¹⁰⁰ Paul and his co-laborers spread the gospel and established churches throughout Asia Minor and around the Aegean Sea.¹⁰¹

In addition, the biblical record reveals that elders collaborated to provide leadership, guidance, and peace for their communities. Moses frequently consulted with the elders of Israel, particularly when making important decisions.¹⁰² During the early

⁹⁷ Exod. 4:14-16.

⁹⁸ Num. 14:6-9.

⁹⁹ 1 Sam. 18:1-4, 23:1.

¹⁰⁰ Mark 3:13-19.

¹⁰¹ Acts 13-15.

¹⁰² Exod. 18:12; Num. 11:16.

years of the church, the apostles and elders in Jerusalem worked together to address issues and make decisions, such as during the Council of Jerusalem.¹⁰³ Paul provided qualifications for elders along with specific instructions and guidance for elders in various churches. He emphasized the importance of their role in shepherding and leading the congregation.¹⁰⁴ Collaborative leadership among elders was an essential aspect of maintaining and guiding the spiritual well-being of the New Testament church.

After considering the biblical concept of collaborative leadership, attention will now be given to the concept of rest found in the Scriptures.

A Biblical View of Rest

The Bible speaks of rest in a number of ways, e.g. to be peaceful, to stop activity, and what is left over or remaining. The focus of this research will be on those expressions of rest that refer to the ceasing of activity, not a quantity remaining.

Rest in the Old Testament

Many Hebrew word groups or cognates in the Old Testament speak of rest. *Sabat* is the most common, occurring 104 times. *Sabat* means “to stop or cease from work or activity.” The concept of Sabbath finds its basis in this word. *Nuah*, occurring sixty-one times, carries the sense of coming to a place of rest with an inner sense of security and ease. *Saqat* means “tranquility and absence of inner anxiety and external pressure.” These

¹⁰³ Acts 15:1-29.

¹⁰⁴ 1 Tim. 3:1-7, 14-15, 5:17; Titus 1:5-9.

three Hebrew word groups make up the majority of the Old Testament references to rest.¹⁰⁵

Sabat

The word *sabat* is found in every section of the Old Testament texts. The first occurrence is found in Genesis 2:2-3, the text from which the creation ordinance of sabbath rest is derived. God completed his work of creation, and he rested. More so, God declared that the seventh day is blessed and holy because on it, he rested. This is the first time in the Bible that God declared something to be holy, a day to be set apart.¹⁰⁶

Because it is holy, the day of rest is to be solemnly observed. Thus, manna would not be collected on the Sabbath,¹⁰⁷ no fire could be kindled on the Sabbath,¹⁰⁸ and the Sabbaths of the Lord must be faithfully kept by the Israelites throughout their generations as a covenant forever.¹⁰⁹ Humanity, made in the image of God, *imago Dei*, is to imitate God, *imitatio Dei*, and rest on the seventh day.¹¹⁰

The feasts and festivals of the Lord to be kept throughout their generations described in Leviticus 23 included the ceasing of work and the command to rest.¹¹¹ Life in ancient Israel was shaped by feasts and festivals, sacrifices, and Sabbaths. All these

¹⁰⁵ “Morphology of Biblical Greek | Logos Bible Software.”

¹⁰⁶ Shelly Miller, *Rhythms of Rest: Finding the Spirit of Sabbath in a Busy World*. Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016, 17.

¹⁰⁷ Exod. 16:26-30.

¹⁰⁸ Exod. 35:3.

¹⁰⁹ Exod. 16:23, 31:15, 35:2; Lev. 16:31, 25:4, 5.

¹¹⁰ Deut. 5:12-15.

¹¹¹ Lev. 23:3, 24, 32, 39

times and seasons shaped the vision, expectation, and pattern of the Israelites' lives.¹¹²

The biblical concept of a sabbatical comes from the Levitical law regarding Sabbath years. This refers to cycles of seven years, with the seventh year designated as a sabbatical year for rest and restoration of the land, as prescribed in the law. The Sabbath year followed six years of planting, cultivating, and harvesting. "...but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to the LORD."¹¹³

While Melissa Sevier, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Aurora, Indiana, writes on the weekly rhythm of Sabbath, the pattern can also be applied to the seven-year cycle. She states, "The idea of a weekly Sabbath recalls to us the rhythms of our lives as we move between work and rest, occupation and renewal. Sabbath reminds us that the world will not stop turning if we cease from our labors for a day."¹¹⁴ The Sabbath rhythm of work and rest in the week is applied to the seven-year cycle.

Nuah

The biblical account of the flood contains the first use of *nuah*, as the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat.¹¹⁵ However, the man who built the ark according to God's design was named Noah by his father Lamech saying, "Out of the ground that the

¹¹² Kelly M. Kapic, *You're Only Human: How Your Limits Reflect God's Design and Why That's Good News* (Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2022), 198.

¹¹³ Lev. 25:4.

¹¹⁴ Melissa Bane Sevier, "How to Benefit from a Sabbatical," *Clergy Journal* 81, no. 1 (October 2004): 11–13, 11.

¹¹⁵ Gen. 8:4.

LORD has cursed, this one shall bring us relief, *nuah*, from our work and from the painful toil of our hands.”¹¹⁶

In the giving of the law to the Israelites by God at Mount Sinai in Exodus 20 and in its recapitulation in Deuteronomy 5, God commands that his day, the seventh day, be kept holy by ceasing from work. “For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested, *nuah*, on the seventh day. Therefore, the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”¹¹⁷ From its foundation in the opening creation narrative (Gen. 1-3) to its inclusion as one of the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:8-11), the call to rest from one’s regular labor was a defining characteristic of the Creator God and his worshipers.¹¹⁸

Nuah is also promised to the Israelites when they complete the conquest of Canaan.¹¹⁹

In Job 3, Job despairs over his birth, finding no rest, *nuah*, nor ease or quiet in the midst of his affliction.¹²⁰

The prophet Isaiah speaks often of the rest, *nuah*, that God would restore to his people as they come out of exile from Babylon and as they are delivered by the coming Servant of the Lord.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Gen. 5:29.

¹¹⁷ Exod. 20:11

¹¹⁸ Kapic, 219.

¹¹⁹ Josh. 1:15, 21:44, 22:4, 23:1.

¹²⁰ Job 3:13, 17, 26.

¹²¹ Isa. 11:2, 10, 14:3, 7, 25:10, 28:12, 32:18, 57:2, 63:14, 66:1.

Saqat

This Hebrew word *saqat* refers to tranquility and absence of inner anxiety and external pressure. Nine of its eleven occurrences in the Old Testament record apply synecdochally to the land or kingdom of Israel, representing the entire nation's experience of rest. These occur in Joshua during the conquest when he apportioned the land according to all that the Lord had spoken to Moses,¹²² in Judges when the people of Israel are delivered from an oppressor,¹²³ and in 2 Chronicles during the reign of Asa, who did what was good and right in the eyes of the Lord his God.¹²⁴ These nine occurrences and the two other occurrences of *saqat* refer to the land, i.e., the nation, knowing tranquility, the absence of inner anxiety and external pressure as the result of obedience to God.

In addition to these three words that inform a biblical view of rest, the concept of sleep also informs a biblical view of rest. Sleep differentiates the creature from the Creator. The Creator never sleeps. Psalm 121:3–4 recalls: “He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.” Confidence in a watchful God allows his people to sleep, knowing that he protects his people. “In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.”¹²⁵ Unlike God, people need sleep, and that is a good

¹²² Josh. 11:23, 14:15.

¹²³ Judg. 3:11, 3:30, 5:31, 8:28.

¹²⁴ 2 Chron. 14:1, 5, 6.

¹²⁵ Ps. 4:8.

gift.¹²⁶ Solomon understood the gift of sleep, writing, “It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep.”¹²⁷

The pastoral images in Psalm 23 present the work of the shepherd leading the flock to places of quiet repose and restoration.¹²⁸ Isaiah points to peace and rest found when a shoot comes forth from the stump of Jesse:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together;
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra,
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder’s den.¹²⁹

Having considered rest in the Old Testament, attention will now be given to rest in the New Testament.

Rest in the New Testament

The biblical concept of rest in the New Testament finds its origins in the Old Testament presentation of the concept at creation. As opposed to the heavy burden placed on the Jewish people by their leaders, Jesus brings new understanding on the purpose of the Sabbath: “And he said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the

¹²⁶ Kopic, *You’re Only Human*, 215.

¹²⁷ Ps. 127:2.

¹²⁸ Ps. 23:1, 2.

¹²⁹ Isa. 11:6-8.

Sabbath.”¹³⁰ He continued, “So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”¹³¹ As Lord of the Sabbath, he implies that he was present at creation when the Sabbath ordinance was established. Therefore, when God rested from his work of creation, Jesus rested.

Dr. Kelly Kapic, Ph.D. Kings College, University of London, and Professor of Theological Studies at Covenant College, observes, “Our rest is not located and secured simply in creation, but in redemption and the promises yet to be fulfilled. We enter into God’s rest, the same God who entered into our world and did what we could not do, so that now we might enter again into the very rest of God (Heb. 4:9-11).”¹³²

According to *Strong’s Concordance*, the Greek root word for “pause” or “to stop” is *pauo*, from which the English word “pause” is derived. The original word *pauo* is rarely used in the New Testament. However, its cognates, *katapausis*, *anapauo*, *anapausis*, *katapauo* and *epanapauomai*, appear often.¹³³ The English word, “pause,” is an obvious derivative, and each point to a different sense of “to cease” or “to rest.”

This study will now focus on the theological and non-theological sense of rest in the New Testament.

The Theological Sense of Rest in the New Testament

Katapausis carries a significant theological meaning because it refers to where the Lord rests or “my rest.”¹³⁴ This sense of rest is picked up below. Another Greek word,

¹³⁰ Mark 2:27.

¹³¹ Mark 2:28.

¹³² Kapic, 222.

¹³³ “Morphology of Biblical Greek | Logos Bible Software.”

¹³⁴ Acts 7:9, Heb. 3:11, 18, 4:1, 3(2X), 5, 10, 11.

sabbatismos, is used only once in the New Testament, but it, too, carries theological significance, referring to Sabbath rest.¹³⁵ This sense, too, is picked up below.

The word *anapauo* and its cognate, *anapausis*, are the two most frequently used Greek words for “rest” in the New Testament. Jesus uses this word to demonstrate his opposition to the prevailing legalism of his day. Pharisaic legalism demanded that one must work hard and keep the law for acceptance, approval, and acknowledgement. Jesus opposed the prominence given to legalism among the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders. He extends an invitation to his disciples in all ages, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”¹³⁶ Rest for the soul extends beyond sleep, relaxation, going on vacation, or even keeping the Sabbath. The heavy yoke laid upon the Jews included even the way the Sabbath was understood and regulated by their leaders.¹³⁷ What Jesus said in his invitation to the “weary and heavy laden” was not just about the Sabbath, but about the whole way of life they would need to adopt if they were to find “rest” for their “souls.” There is a “yoke” that comes with the rest Jesus invites us into—a way of living the life of faith in him.¹³⁸ The yoke Jesus offers is the freedom found in the gospel. Dr. Richard Averbeck, Professor of Old Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, makes this clear. “Knowing and admitting one’s

¹³⁵ Heb. 4:9.

¹³⁶ Matt. 11:28, 29.

¹³⁷ Richard E. Averbeck, “A Rest for the Soul,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 11, no. 1 (May 1, 2018): 5–22, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1939790918767991>, 12.

¹³⁸ Averbeck. 13.

need is where it begins, and coming to Jesus is where it must lead if there is going to be any ‘rest for the soul.’”¹³⁹

Rest for the soul happens in this life as believers rest in God through the finished work of Jesus Christ. Dr. Burk Parsons is the senior pastor of Saint Andrew’s Chapel in Sanford, Fla. and chief editorial officer for Ligonier Ministries. He writes, “As believers, just as the Author of our faith made us dependent to find rest in Him at our conversion, so the same Finisher of our faith is about the unrelenting business of making us dependent everyday of our lives to find daily rest in Him alone.” The finished work of Christ provides true rest for those who rest in him. St. Augustine referred to this rest in his familiar prayer in the *Confessions*, “Great art Thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is Thy power, and of Thy wisdom there is no end. And man, being a part of Thy creation, desires to praise Thee...Thou movest us to delight in praising Thee; for Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.”¹⁴⁰

The rest for the soul in Christ is both temporal and eternal. The Apostle Paul frames up this understanding in 2 Corinthians 5:1-4 using language consistent with his vocation as a tentmaker and, metaphorically, as a picture of the temporal reality and the eternal promise. He says:

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed,

¹³⁹ Averbeck, 9.

¹⁴⁰ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, The Fathers of the Church, a New Translation (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1966), <https://search.covenantseminary.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip&db=e000xna&AN=498868&site=eds-live&scope=site>, 4.

but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

The souls of believers find rest in this temporal state, the tent, but long for permanent rest in the eternal state, “a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

In addition, Jesus, Luke, and Paul use “sleep” as a metaphor for death, not to minimize its impact, but to highlight its temporary nature.¹⁴¹ Falling asleep is how people enter his rest.

The writer of Hebrews uses *katapausis* to pick up the theological theme of entering God’s rest, the teleological rest the redeemed of the Lord experience when they are glorified. The phrases, “enter his rest” or “enter my rest,” in Hebrews 3 and 4 are taken from Deuteronomy 12:8 and 9 where God pledges rest in the inheritance given for obeying his commands. The inheritance ensured to obedient Israelites is the Promised Land. It is the temporal shadow of believer’s eternal home. Entering his rest, then, is a metaphor for eternal rest received in glorification. The Sabbath rest referred to by the word *sabbatismos* is also used metaphorically to point to eternal Sabbath rest, the rest believers know when they are glorified. This is the rest guaranteed for believers in Revelation 14:13, “And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!”

The Non-Theological Sense of Rest in the New Testament

A number of Greek words refer to rest in the non-theological sense of ceasing activity, revive, remain quiet, and relief.

¹⁴¹ Matt. 9:24, Mark 5:39, Luke 8:52, Acts 7:60, 1 Cor. 15:51, 1 Thess. 4:13, 14.

Jesus provides rest for his exhausted disciples after their first missionary outing saying, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest awhile.”¹⁴² He invites those harried by hurry and hard work to find rest in him.

Two of the gospel accounts share “a day in the life of” narrative, pulling back the curtain on the ebb and flow of work and rest in the life of Christ. Keith Meyer, D.Min., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, captures this well.

Early on when following Jesus, the disciples experienced his “stopping” rhythms. In the gospels of Mark and Luke there is what appears to be a rare record of one whole day’s time in Jesus’ early ministry, not repeated until the recorded daylong periods of the Passion Week. The texts follow Jesus through one twenty-four hour period, from a Sabbath morning of stressful synagogue ministry complete with the casting out of a demon, to lunch or dinner at Peter’s home after healing Peter’s mother-in-law, then closing the evening of the Sabbath which brought the whole town to his door for healing and finally sleep and ending with a very early morning retreat of Jesus by himself to a “lonely place.”¹⁴³

This rhythm of work and rest, ministry and retreat, had an impact on the disciples. Jesus did not yield to the demands of the crowds or the expectations of the disciples. He continued to heal and feed and teach. And he stopped to rest, renew, or pray. With him in “a certain place,” one of the disciples would ask him to teach them how to pray in such a way.¹⁴⁴ His inner circle of Peter, James, and John witnessed this rhythm powerfully as they came away with him to pray on the Mount of Transfiguration and in the valley of the Garden of Gethsemane. As Meyer puts it, “They were stopped both by Jesus’ intervening direction to go to other towns and by the catching force of his example.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Mark 6:31a.

¹⁴³ Meyer, 224.

¹⁴⁴ Luke 11:1

¹⁴⁵ Meyer, 225.

In addition to the way Jesus demonstrated and offered rest, the Bible notes many other times when people needed rest. Most prominent is when the Apostle Paul describes his distress on missionary journeys. He states in 2 Corinthians 7:5, “For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within.” He also reports how he was frequently refreshed through the presence of friends and co-laborers.¹⁴⁶

Summary of the Biblical Framework

In the previous section, the actualities of distress, collaborative leadership, and rest were reviewed within the biblical framework. With this review in mind, distress is a reality that cannot be dismissed, a reality that produces a longing for deliverance, a longing to enter the rest God has prepared for his people. Collaborative leadership occurs when God’s people experience distress and when God’s peace and rest is needed. Through collaborative leadership, God provides rest for his people when they experience distress, seen in the Old and New Testaments and in both the temporal and eternal senses. God answers his people’s deepest needs and longings; he delivers them from distress through rest, often through collaborative leadership.

Attention will now be given to the extra-biblical literature on pastoral distress.

Considering Pastoral Distress

In the preface to Jimmy Dodd’s, *Pastors are People Too*, Scott Sauls, author of *Jesus Outside the Lines* and *BeFriend*, refers to a familiar quote from Charles Spurgeon,

¹⁴⁶ Rom. 15:32, 1 Cor. 16:18, 2 Cor. 7:13, 2 Tim. 1:16, Philem. 20.

the “prince of preachers.” Spurgeon is said to have told his students that if they could be happy doing anything else, they should. Sauls adds that Spurgeon said this for two reasons. First, the heavy weight born by those who preach the Word of God takes a heavy toll. Second, “*being a pastor is hard*” (emphasis original).¹⁴⁷

The reality of stress responses among pastors to circumstances is a commonly accepted fact. A survey of 1,000 pastors by Lifeway in March of 2021 revealed that 63 percent of pastors list stress as their greatest constant issue.¹⁴⁸

Despite this statistic, literature is difficult to find that addresses pastoral or clergy distress. Many publications address pastors as practitioners of pastoral care for those experiencing distress, not as the one needing care. Laura Edwards holds a Trent Doctorate in Clinical Psychology from the University of Lincoln in Lincoln, UK. She states, “As a unique occupational group, the clergy is under-represented in occupational health and psychological wellbeing literature, despite the limited available research suggesting they experience above average rates of psychological distress relating to their role.”¹⁴⁹ She stated earlier in this same article, “Despite the complexity of the role, emotional workload, and self-reported distress, there is a paucity of research considering how clergy copes with the demands they face, the support they access, and their attitudes

¹⁴⁷ Jimmy Dodd and Larry Magnuson, “Pastors Are People Too: What They Won’t Tell You but You Need to Know (PastorServe Series): Dodd, Jimmy, 9781434709219: Amazon.Com: Books,” 2016, 17.

¹⁴⁸ “The-Greatest-Needs-of-Pastors-Phase-2-Quantitative-Report-Release-1.Pdf,” accessed October 19, 2024, <https://research.lifeway.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/The-Greatest-Needs-of-Pastors-Phase-2-Quantitative-Report-Release-1.pdf>.

¹⁴⁹ Laura Edwards et al., ““Jesus Got Crucified, Why Should We Expect Any Different?”; UK Christian Clergies’ Experiences of Coping with Role Demands and Seeking Support*,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 25, no. 4 (April 2022): 462–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2022.2059068>, 464.

to help-seeking.”¹⁵⁰ And again, “The clergy-role is complex, and despite a steady increase of research into the impact of stressful occupations, there remains a dearth of literature investigating the impact of the clergy-role on the clergy.”¹⁵¹

Though the terms “pastoral distress” and “clergy distress” appear rarely in the literature, one can find literature on clergy burnout, work-related distress, and psychological distress among pastors. Some, such as Cordeiro, use terms like “long-term stress” to communicate the same idea.¹⁵² As stated in the Introduction, burnout is only one aspect of clergy distress, but the two are often equated.

Clergy Burnout

The title of Wayne Cordeiro’s book, *Leading on Empty*, speaks volumes. Burnout occurs when leaders are out of fuel. The tanks are empty. The cumulative effect of exhaustion and unrealistic expectations paralyzes and wears down the mind, body, and relationships.¹⁵³ The damaging and unmistakable consequences of burnout include exhaustion, apathy, despair, numbness, and depression. Often it is not a major catastrophic event that brings pastors down but the ongoing, unrelenting, oppressive stress on the treadmill of ministry, where they simply cannot keep up the pace.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ Edwards et al, 463.

¹⁵¹ Edwards et al, 462.

¹⁵² Wayne Cordeiro, *Leading on Empty : Refilling Your Tank and Renewing Your Passion* (Minneapolis, Minn: Bethany House Publishers, 2009), 51.

¹⁵³ Kelly M. Kapic, *You’re Only Human: How Your Limits Reflect God’s Design and Why That’s Good News* (Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2022), 196.

¹⁵⁴ J.R. Briggs, “Fail : Finding Hope and Grace in the Midst of Ministry Failure,” 2014, 50.

Consequences associated with professional burnout include: impaired job satisfaction, absenteeism, decreased productivity, reduced organizational commitment, impaired physical health, reduced quality of life, loss of purpose, emotional problems, loneliness, lowered self-esteem, marital conflict, and a substantial loss of closeness and enjoyment in relationships both personally and professionally.¹⁵⁵ The long-term stress of these workplace demands depletes the normal fuel produced biochemically by hormones and secreted into the brain and nervous system.¹⁵⁶ Further consequences of burnout include changing jobs or leaving the ministry altogether.¹⁵⁷

On a side note, even when pastors experience some of these consequences, they may not be experiencing burnout. For example, just because a pastor struggles with obesity and depression does not mean that the pastor is suffering from burnout.

Occupational Distress Among Clergy

Occupational distress is frequently referred to in the literature as occupational stress or work-related distress. Occupational stress is a response to four broad categories of workplace demands: task demands (occupation, careers, workload, job insecurity); role demands (role conflict and ambiguity); physical demands (temperature, lighting, workplace design); and interpersonal demands (social density, personality conflicts, leadership style, group pressures).¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Adams and Hough, "Clergy Burnout," 148.

¹⁵⁶ Cordeiro. 51.

¹⁵⁷ David von Schlichten, "The Pastoral Mystique: A Feminist Ecclesiological Approach to Clergy Burnout...: Covenant Discovery," January 1, 200AD, 150.

¹⁵⁸ James Campbell Quick and Demetria F. Henderson, "Occupational Stress: Preventing Suffering, Enhancing Wellbeing †," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 13, no. 5 (May 2016): 459, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph13050459>, 2.

The limited research reveals that pastors struggle with occupational distress at similar levels to those in other helping fields.¹⁵⁹ However, stress levels for clergy can reach emotionally distressing levels when an imbalance between effort and reward exists. High efforts at meeting intrinsic or self-imposed demands or extrinsic demands paired with low rewards results in emotional distress.¹⁶⁰

Psychological Distress among Clergy

The American Psychological Association defines psychological distress as

...a set of painful mental and physical symptoms that are associated with normal fluctuations of mood in most people. In some cases, however, psychological distress may indicate the beginning of major depressive disorder, anxiety disorder, schizophrenia, somatization disorder, or a variety of other clinical conditions. It is thought to be what is assessed by many putative self-report measures of depression and anxiety.¹⁶¹

While mental health concerns are on the rise nationwide, there is a growing concern for the mental health of caregivers in helping professions.¹⁶² Those in helping professions include teachers, social workers, counselors, clergy, and first responders,¹⁶³ and the multitude of stressors pastors face leading to psychological distress is covered in the Introduction. Distress among clergy often results in compassion fatigue marked by exhaustion, reduced ability to feel sympathy and empathy, anger and irritability, increased use of alcohol and drugs, and diminished enjoyment of their career, among

¹⁵⁹ Adams and Hough, "Clergy Burnout," 151.

¹⁶⁰ Adams and Hough, 151.

¹⁶¹ "APA Dictionary of Psychology," accessed November 26, 2024, <https://dictionary.apa.org/>.

¹⁶² Martin A L Shaw et al., "Clergy Wholeness Study: How Occupational Distress, Depression, and Social Support Inform the Health of Clergy," *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 75, no. 1 (March 2021): 23–32, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1542305020968046>, 13.

¹⁶³ Adams and Hough, "Clergy Burnout," 151.

other symptoms.¹⁶⁴ Pastors consistently reported that interpersonal conflicts—the ordinary grind of disagreements over policies and goals and personalities in their churches—were among the more difficult aspects of pastoral leadership.¹⁶⁵ The distress this causes pastors was not due to the technical side of conflict resolution. It was the personal toll the interpersonal conflict took on their energy levels, on their enthusiasm for ministry, and on their love for their congregations.¹⁶⁶ Senior Pastor Emeritus at College Church in Wheaton, Illinois, Kent Hughes, confirms:

The pastor's inevitable knowledge of the forces at work among his people—the individual sins of some, the hidden family problems, the conflicts between members, the dissatisfactions, the life-style inconsistencies, the differing perspectives on what the church should be—can make the pastor *feel* as if one wrong move will bring the whole thing down.¹⁶⁷

Summary of the Literature on Pastoral Distress

Though the term, “pastoral distress,” is not found in the literature, clergy burnout, occupational and psychological distress are. These concepts name the weight of leadership and the distresses pastors must endure.

The examination of literature on clergy burnout, occupational and psychological distress is now followed by a consideration of how pastors in distress collaborate with lay leaders to secure a sabbatical.

¹⁶⁴ Françoise Mathieu, “Running on Empty: Compassion Fatigue in Health Professionals,” *Rehab & Community Care Medicine*, Spring 2007, 2.

¹⁶⁵ Jinkins, “Great Expectations, Sobering Realities,” 13.

¹⁶⁶ Jinkins, 14.

¹⁶⁷ R. Kent Hughes and Barbara Hughes, *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1987), 65.

Collaborative Leadership

“Humans’ ability to effectively collaborate is at the crux of leadership.”¹⁶⁸

In their book on navigating power dynamics and negotiating interests in ministry contexts, Burns, et. al., define politics as “the art of getting things done with others.”

They go on to say that all ministry involves politics.¹⁶⁹ Identifying four shared activities of politics—power, interests, negotiation, and ethical implications—is vital to collaboration. Burns, et.al., explain, “Every day, people are using their power to negotiate their interests in relationships with other people, always with ethical implications, in order to get things done.”¹⁷⁰ This research utilizes these four shared activities of politics to address how pastors and lay leaders collaborate to secure a sabbatical for pastors.

Power

Leaders exercise power, both formal and relational, to act and influence others.¹⁷¹

Formal power

Formal power is derived from position within an organizational structure.¹⁷² In his book, *Don’t Blow Up Your Ministry*, Michael MacKenzie, Clinical Director of Marble Retreat, states, “There is power in the position of the Christian leader.”¹⁷³ Pastors possess

¹⁶⁸ Jonathan Tyler Clark, “Developing Collaborative Leadership: A Study Of Organizational Change Toward Greater Collaboration And Shared Leadership” (Ohio, Antioch University, 2008).

¹⁶⁹ Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry : Navigating Power Dynamics and Negotiating Interests* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 18.

¹⁷⁰ Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, 17.

¹⁷¹ Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 19.

¹⁷² Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 21.

¹⁷³ Michael MacKenzie, *Don’t Blow Up Your Ministry : Defuse the Underlying Issues That Take Pastors Down* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2021), 4.

formal power as power is placed upon them by recognized governing structures and the culture surrounding those structures.¹⁷⁴ They are empowered by their governing structures to use their formal power to act and influence the church, strategically within limits, for the spiritual growth of the church.¹⁷⁵ Lay leaders, too, often operate in a governing structure that has given them formal power through a ritual, conferring upon them the biblical titles of elder or deacon. Depending on the form of governance—hierarchical, representative, or congregational—the pastor and lay leaders may be considered equals within the system, or the pastor may exist above or even outside the system. No matter the system, the lines of formal power must be explicit. At the same time, the manner in which relational power is used within the system will often determine whether outcomes are beneficial or not.

When collaborating to secure a sabbatical for the pastor, the pastor and the lay leaders exercise formal power in approving making and keeping policies. Determining how the decisions are made, however, often rests more upon the second kind of power, relational power.

Relational power

In addition to formal power, pastors and lay leaders possess relational power. Relational power is built up over time spent in long-term, intense, and significant relationships within the leadership community or as Herrington, et.al., refer to it, the “living system.”¹⁷⁶ Relational power often influences others in the system more than

¹⁷⁴ Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 40.

¹⁷⁵ Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, 42.

¹⁷⁶ Herrington, Taylor, and Creech, *The Leader's Journey*, 39.

formal power and builds over time into a primary power resource called relational capital.

“Relational capital is an organization’s resources located within the relationships among employees, clients, constituents, providers, congregants, and other relevant people.”¹⁷⁷

Relational capital must be built up intentionally, sensitively, and proactively out of sincere care for the other and not out of selfish gain. As the Apostle Paul commands, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.”¹⁷⁸ Pastors and lay leaders must spend relational capital wisely, fostering growth while avoiding depletion of their implied power.¹⁷⁹

Finally, acknowledging that power is rarely equal among people fosters the responsible and redemptive use of power in personal and organizational settings. As ministry leaders “grow in biblical wisdom and realistic awareness of human uses of power,” they are better equipped to demonstrate just and loving equality within relational and organizational environments.¹⁸⁰

Collaborating to secure a sabbatical for pastors necessitates the use of relational power to ensure all interests are understood and represented.

Interests

Interests are a person’s priority preferences held at a given time. They are the concerns that fuel emotions, motivations, and actions. Leaders within a governing

¹⁷⁷ Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 23.

¹⁷⁸ Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 24; *The Holy Bible*. Philippians 2:3.

¹⁷⁹ Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 44.

¹⁸⁰ Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, 49.

structure each possess differing interests.¹⁸¹ Some interests are held loosely while others may become “hills to die on.” When leaders improve their skill at identifying their own and others’ interests, empathizing with those who hold differing interests, and managing their interests, they lead more responsibly and wisely.¹⁸²

When pastors work with lay leaders to provide a sabbatical for pastors, there are three sets of stakeholders: the pastor, the lay leaders, and the congregation. “Stakeholders are all those who have something to gain or to lose as a result of the decisions and actions being considered by the participants in active negotiation.”¹⁸³ Each stakeholder may hold personal, organizational and cultural interests. Collaborating to secure a sabbatical for the pastor requires consideration of how granting a sabbatical will fulfill the interests of each of the stakeholders personally, organizationally, and within the broader culture.

As stated previously, people possess differing personal interests. Naturally, people seeking the healthy pursuit of interests gather with people who share similar interests. Marshalling the healthy pursuit of similar interests is best accomplished, according to Herrington, et.al., through triangles, the building blocks of emotional systems. The three sets of stakeholders in the church considering a sabbatical for the pastor—the pastor, lay leaders, the congregation—form a stable triangle for such pursuits.

The organizational structure of interests relevant to this research is the local church, which possesses formal and relational structure. Churches have a history chronicled in their minutes, records and policies, and unwritten narratives held by the

¹⁸¹ Burns, et.al., 211, 62.

¹⁸² Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 56.

¹⁸³ Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, 170.

various members. Pastors collaborate with lay leaders within this ambiguous, yet real, mixture of formal and relational structure.

For many pastors and lay leaders, their denomination constitutes the broader societal culture. Pastors and lay leaders in non-denominational churches may look to ministerial alliances or associations as their broader culture.

Collaboration intent on securing a sabbatical for pastors so that they remain in ministry must include interests represented by all three sets of stakeholders, not only the interests of the leadership but the congregation as well. Robert Saler, Associate Dean and Research Professor of Religion and Culture at Christian Theological Seminary, explains that a pastoral sabbatical is not product-oriented unless one considers the product being the regained energy and focus that allows the pastor to be “renewed for a long ministry with their congregation.”¹⁸⁴

Once interests are clarified and understood, the leaders can now enter into productive negotiation.

Negotiation

Negotiation is the process when two or more persons with common or conflicting interests work toward reaching an agreement.¹⁸⁵ It promotes interests with the power available and is how one gets what one wants. Understanding the amount of power participants possess and the level at which they share interests is critical for successful negotiation.¹⁸⁶ The best outcomes emerge when power is equal, and interests are shared.

¹⁸⁴ “Planning Sabbaticals : A Guide for Congregations and Their Pastors,” 4.

¹⁸⁵ Michael Newman, *Defining the Enemy: Adult Education in Social Action* (Sydney: Stewart Victor, 1994), 153.

¹⁸⁶ Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 172.

Participants in negotiation are equipped to collaborate well in such circumstances.¹⁸⁷

Therefore, when collaborating to secure a sabbatical for pastors, the pastor and lay leaders function best when their power is equal, and their interests are shared in common.

Ethical Implications

Participating in the politics of ministry decision making raises ethical questions. To keep power, interests, and negotiation from crossing ethical bounds, consideration must be given to the stakeholders. How the stakeholders are perceived and represented must be considered. Are all interests clearly understood and fully represented? The negotiation process must be managed biblically to avoid unethical decisions and actions.¹⁸⁸ The Apostle Paul clarifies this when he says, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves” and “Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.”¹⁸⁹

Securing a Sabbatical

The research question guiding this section is, “How do pastors and lay leaders collaborate to secure a sabbatical for the pastors so they remain in ministry?” The research thus far has shown that pastors experience distress that requires self-care. As the literature review will soon show, sabbatical—one aspect of self-care—provides the pastor in distress with opportunity to rest and recharge.

Securing sabbaticals requires collaborative leadership within the leadership community. Collaborative leadership must navigate the shared activities of the system in

¹⁸⁷ Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, 120.

¹⁸⁸ Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, 29.

¹⁸⁹ Phil. 2:3, 1 Cor. 10:24.

order to secure a sabbatical for the pastor in distress. How do they utilize these shared activities to secure a sabbatical? When considering securing a sabbatical for the pastor, the stakeholders are the pastor, the lay leaders, and the congregation. When the pastor experiences distress, he may lose physical, emotional, and spiritual health. He may lose his marriage. He may lose his job. But when he gains a sabbatical, he may find restoration for his health, renewal in his marriage, and renewed joy in his calling. When the pastor remains in distress, the lay leaders may lose confidence in the pastor or in their ability to care for him. When the pastor receives a sabbatical, the lay leaders gain confidence in their care for the pastor and in their ability to lead without his immediate presence. When pastors are in distress, the congregation may feel leaderless, stemming from a lack of confidence. Many researchers observe that the consequences of burnout are experienced not only by the pastor but also by the recipients of the intended care. The consequences of burnout are potentially serious not only for workers but also for recipients of the intended care.¹⁹⁰ When he is given a sabbatical, they anticipate that as he receives the care he needs, he is able to extend care to others. They anxiously anticipate his return.

Pastors and lay leaders must understand the power dynamics at work in and on the system. Equality of power and a high level of shared interests allow negotiation to proceed well. When there is a balance of power, interests, and negotiation, ethical implications are minimal.

¹⁹⁰ Adams and Hough, "Clergy Burnout," 148.

Summary of the Literature on Leader Collaboration

The literature review has shown how leaders collaborate to secure sabbaticals for pastors. The literature review presented politics as the art of getting things done with others, in this case collaboration among the three groups of stakeholders. When church leaders collaborate, the church benefits. The benefit relating to this research is that of securing a sabbatical for pastors enabling them to stay in ministry.

Attention will now be given to the literature on the benefits of a sabbatical: rest.

The Benefits of a Sabbatical: Rest

In his book, *Pastoral Sabbaticals: A Guide for Congregations and Their Pastors*, Robert Saler defines “pastoral sabbatical” as any extended period in which the pastor steps away from the day-to-day practices of ministry to focus on spiritual development so as to return with renewed energy for ministry. He goes on to clarify, “...a ‘pastoral sabbatical’ is, at minimum, an extended period of time in which the pastor is away from the congregation pursuing a variety of intentionally renewing activities.”¹⁹¹

MacKenzie warns that a Christian leader’s ministerial effectiveness is contained in a vessel that must be cared for, and that care involves mastering internal and external pressure.¹⁹² For the pastor, sabbatical is a powerful aspect of self-care. Three elements of a good sabbatical include learning, rest, and renewal.¹⁹³ As the name “sabbatical” implies, it begins and ends with rest. “The number one enemy of Christian spiritual

¹⁹¹ “Planning Sabbaticals: A Guide for Congregations and Their Pastors,” 3.

¹⁹² MacKenzie, *Don’t Blow Up Your Ministry*, 4.

¹⁹³ Sevier, “How to Benefit from a Sabbatical,” 12.

formation today is exhaustion...the failure to [rest] results in damage to physical health, loss of energy, and decreased productivity.”¹⁹⁴ Cordeiro agrees, stating, “We are never more vulnerable to depression from burnout than when we are totally fatigued and overtired.”¹⁹⁵

Unrest is feeling fearful, anxious, panicked, scattered, harried, hurried, overwhelmed, exhausted, discontent, and driven. Rest can be described as a state of peace, contentment, serenity, refreshment, stillness, tranquility, or calm.¹⁹⁶ Jay Fowler, Executive Director of the Midwest Region of PastorServe, authors the blog, “Pastors need rest!” He notes, “A pastor’s capacity is not unlimited. If you are a pastor, make sure you are taking regular time to back away from the rigors of pastoral ministry.”¹⁹⁷ A healthy view of finitude allows pastors to step back, take a breath, and weigh the importance of life’s seasons, the rhythms of physical bodies, and the repetitive wear and tear over days, months, and years. Appreciating divinely created rhythms counteracts the perpetual frustration and self-condemnation of limits, especially those masquerading as sin.¹⁹⁸ Harmonizing expectations with the seasons and rhythms of life builds a faithful

¹⁹⁴ James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in Love with the God Jesus Knows* (IVP, 2009), 34.

¹⁹⁵ Cordeiro, 122.

¹⁹⁶ Siang-Yang Tan, *Rest: Experiencing God’s Peace in a Restless World* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Vine Books, 2000), 21.

¹⁹⁷ Jay Fowler, “3 Things Every Pastor Needs | PastorServe,” *PastorServe* (blog), January 27, 2016, <https://pastorserve.org/3-things-every-pastor-needs/>.

¹⁹⁸ Kopic, 197.

life,¹⁹⁹ and since Sabbath observance is the beginning of sabbath rest, keeping a Sabbath weekly teaches pastors how to make time "holy."²⁰⁰

Underlying any appropriate understanding of clergy renewal is the assumption of the need for rest.²⁰¹ Rest, particularly extended rest, provides opportunity for physical, emotional, and psychological restoration, recharge, and renewal. The most important practice to develop during a sabbatical is choosing renewal over busyness.²⁰²

Practicing sabbath begins with the observance of the weekly Sabbath. J.R. Briggs, pastor and founder of Kairos Partnerships, writes in his book, *Fail*, "I have yet to meet a burned-out pastor who practiced sabbath religiously. Sabbath is God's clearest invitation to 'learn the unforced rhythms of grace.'"²⁰³ He explains that if church leaders take over headship of the church, their to-do list will only grow. Church leaders must trust Christ, the true head of the church, and slow down. "Sabbath is not only a day of deep rest; it is also a day of deep trust."²⁰⁴ Kapic explains that only when trusting that the Creator and Redeemer are one and the same and that he is present in his steadfast love and compassion can pastors rest.²⁰⁵ "Your church will not unravel because you take one day every week to rest. However, if you refuse to rest, chances are eventually you might be

¹⁹⁹ Kapic, 197.

²⁰⁰ Kruger, "Rediscovering the Point," 9.

²⁰¹ Sevier, "How to Benefit from a Sabbatical," 12.

²⁰² Sevier, 13.

²⁰³ J.R. Briggs, "Fail: Finding Hope and Grace in the Midst of Ministry Failure," 2014, 167.

²⁰⁴ Briggs, 167

²⁰⁵ Kapic, 213, 214.

the one unraveling.”²⁰⁶ Many other authors highlight the necessity and the difficulty pastors experience in the regular observance of Sabbath (Burns et al., Cordeiro, Kapic, Tripp, and more).

Some equate sleep with rest. God does not sleep, but God incarnate slept. Jesus endured temptation from the Devil himself, walked for miles, preached and taught continually, healed and cast out demons,²⁰⁷ and his sleep was disrupted by the necessity of prayer.²⁰⁸ He needed sleep. His body needed the rest only sleep could provide.

Pastors need sleep. They face temptation, preach and teach, counsel, visit the sick, and lead. They bear concerns for their marriages, families, friends, and neighbors. “No other calling I know requires such repeated presence at the liminal places of human life -- hospital rooms, funeral parlors, homeless streets, and more.”²⁰⁹ Ministry will not turn itself off. People’s needs are always there, and so the work of ministry is never done.²¹⁰ They need the rest that sleep affords.

But rest is not just about sleep. Rest is found in sleep, but it is also found elsewhere. People were designed not only to work but to rest, just as God rested after six days of creative work.²¹¹ Sabbatical provides the pastor with time to rest, recharge, and

²⁰⁶ J.R. Briggs, 167.

²⁰⁷ Mark 1:12-2:13.

²⁰⁸ Mark 1:35, Luke 6:12, Matt. 26:36-46.

²⁰⁹ Lisa Maguire Hess, “Sabbath Renewal Recovering Play in Pastoral Ministry,” *Clergy Journal* 81, no. 1 (October 2004): 15–16, 16.

²¹⁰ Meyer, “Stopping Lessons,” 223.

²¹¹ Kapic, 219.

renew. Stopping from the work of ministry is essential to staying healthy in ministry.²¹²

Cordeiro, in his final chapter in *Leading on Empty*, provides stimulus for *Finding Solitude in Sabbaticals*. He writes, “There will...be seasons when a sabbatical, or an extended season of rest, becomes crucial to sustaining the shelf life of a minister or Christian leader.”²¹³ Pastors in distress need a time of rest and renewal to remain in ministry. The renewal period, comprised of the pastor’s sabbatical and the congregation’s intentional use of the time, provides a spiritual foundation and a holy goad toward a new season of shared ministry together.²¹⁴

Congregations can use the sabbatical time for several purposes. They can develop lay leadership and better understand the work of the pastor. They can also learn to better practice Sabbath rest themselves. Their release of the pastor for an extended time can extend the pastor’s ministry and energize him to recover or discover fresh ideas for ministry. Importantly, sabbaticals also offer pastors the experience of “life in the pew,” helping them develop empathy for the weekly ministry of the pew.²¹⁵

Sabbaticals are a potentially effective tool to confront issues of burnout and stress. Pastors can accelerate their pace of ministry and not realize they have forgotten how to stop.²¹⁶ Taking a sabbatical is an integral part of the pastor’s self-care. “The understanding that lack of self-care can lead to burnout, which can lead to depression,

²¹² Meyer, 223.

²¹³ Cordeiro, *Leading on Empty*, 185.

²¹⁴ “Planning Sabbaticals : A Guide for Congregations and Their Pastors,” 2.

²¹⁵ Gwen Wagstrom Halaas, *The Right Road : Life Choices for Clergy* (Minneapolis, MN : Fortress Press, 2004), <http://archive.org/details/rightroadlifecho0000hala>, 84, 85.

²¹⁶ Meyer, 222.

should raise enough alarm for all pastoral caregivers to commit to better self-care.”²¹⁷ . Melissa Sevier, author of *How to Benefit from a Sabbatical*, comments, “Many pastors find a new creative outlet during their sabbatical time through painting, pottery, music, or some other previously undiscovered or underdeveloped talent.”²¹⁸ Additionally, sabbaticals can maintain long-term ministry by heading off the decline in expectations that often occurs after a pastor has remained in one place for many years.²¹⁹

As an eschatological reality, the church is the body of Christ, who nourishes it with word and sacrament through the power of the Holy Spirit. As a temporal reality, the church is, in Augustine’s great image, *permixte*: an odd mix of light and shadow, sin and grace, resilience and frailty.²²⁰

Jimmy Dodd and Larry Magnuson, contributors to the PastorServe Resource series, in their book *Pastors are People Too*, encourage churches to more consistently provide support and encouragement to the pastor and staff—and their families. They suggest that churches offer their pastor a sabbatical before burnout is near. In their chapter on compensation, they include a section on establishing a sabbatical policy.²²¹

²¹⁷ MacKenzie, *Don’t Blow Up Your Ministry*, 114.

²¹⁸ Sevier, “How to Benefit from a Sabbatical,” 13.

²¹⁹ Kruger, “Rediscovering the Point,” 7.

²²⁰ Sheila Greeve Davaney et al., “Funding and Teaching Challenges Facing Faith-Based Organizing,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 6, no. 4 (October 2012): 479–86, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15697320-12341250>, 486.

²²¹ Dodd, Jimmy, Magnuson, Larry. *Pastors are People Too: What they won’t tell you but you need to know*. David C. Cook: Colorado Springs, CO. 2016, 134-137.

Summary of the Benefits of Sabbatical

Many churches grant sabbaticals when it is too late, when a pastor is already burned out, had a fall, or is completing a project rather than truly taking a Shabbat. Seldom is a sabbatical offered to cultivate a life more fully at rest so that sabbatical becomes a way of life after the sabbatical rather than just on sabbatical.²²² Sabbaticals offer time for the pastor who has experienced distress to learn, renew, and rest.

Summary of Literature Review

In light of the literature examined, there are three primary themes pastors must be aware of when experiencing distress.

Distress is real. Even for pastors.

Leaders must collaborate. Leaders with formal power must work with leaders who hold informal power to meet the needs and interests of the stakeholders: pastors, lay leaders, and the congregation.

Rest is necessary. Rest benefits the body and the mind. Renewal of passion for ministry occurs through rest. Sharpening the mind and renewing the body occurs when the pastor pauses from the demands of ministry and refuels.

A sabbatical allows time for the pastor in distress to break from the work, experience restoration, renew creativity, and refuel.

God set an example to follow. By instituting the seventh day as a day of rest, holy to God, God gave his people a pattern and a command to obey.

²²² Meyer, "Stopping Lessons," 230.

In an article for Ligonier Ministries, Miles Van Pelt, the Alan Hayes Belcher Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Languages at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi states:

...we work because God works; His image-bearers imitate His image. In the same way, we rest from our work because God rested from His work. Both work and rest are image-of-God activities. They are two sides of the same coin.

He goes on to say that God rested, not because he was exhausted but because he had completed his work, and so Christians are to also rest after having completed their work.²²³ Because God completed his work, he rested. Imitating his rest because he completed his work is not realistic when the end of the to-do list never comes. They can never visit all their parishioners and often enter the pulpit feeling they could do more with the passage they are preaching.

While a good amount of literature on sabbaticals is readily available to those seeking it, the noticeable absence of content about sabbatical in places where it is expected is disappointing. Turner and Fike agree: current literature on Christian sabbatical is sparse.²²⁴

In his confrontational book, *Dangerous Calling*, author, pastor and speaker Paul David Tripp suggests eight steps pastors can take to a better, healthier way. But in his list, he fails to suggest a sabbatical.²²⁵ This omission is mysteriously strange. However, in his

²²³ Miles Van Pelt, "The Purpose of Labor and Rest," Ligonier Ministries, January 25, 2015, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/purpose-labor-and-rest>.

²²⁴ Christopher K Turner and Douglas Fike, "The Transformational Effects of Sabbatical in Leadership Development," *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 5, no. 1 (2013): 94–114, 97.

²²⁵ Paul David Tripp, *Dangerous Calling : Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 79.

book, *Lead*, he does point out that a lack of commitment to Sabbaths of rest points to a heart out of balance.²²⁶ He asserts, “And you will always need Sabbath rest no matter how mature you become or how many leaders work alongside you.”²²⁷

Arthur Gross Schaeffer, former instructor at Loyola Marymount University, identifies twelve common factors in clergy burnout and seven positive countermeasures in his article, “Surviving Clergy Burnout,” for *Encounter*. These countermeasures include recovery of Sabbath, and he does mention taking a sabbatical.

The Resilient Leader by Alfred Ells, a helpful book for pastors who encounter conflict and crises, lists five disciplines that build resilience. The discipline of rest, taking time off, or taking an extended sabbatical, are never mentioned.

Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell has written widely on the clergy health crisis and includes a chapter titled, “A Practical Guide to Combating Stress Symptoms,” in her book, *Faithful and Fractured*. Proeschold-Bell agrees with Tripp and Dodd that a pastor’s calling is fraught with stress. Decrying the lack of clear definitions for stress in the research, Proeschold-Bell does not define stress herself. Moreover, the idea or concept of distress is never addressed. When addressing the causes of stress, Proeschold-Bell examines circumstances, individual appraisal of the circumstances, coping process, and stress symptoms as causes for stress responses by pastors. She supplies practical ideas for working through each of these stress-inducing issues. However, she does not

²²⁶ “Lead : 12 Gospel Principles for Leadership in the Church: Covenant Discovery,” accessed November 9, 2024, <https://eds-p-ebshost-com.search.covenantseminary.edu/eds/detail/detail?vid=2&sid=137f4b0d-ccef-4028-903c-d57f4957435a%40redis&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPWlwJnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmUmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d#AN=2517314&db=nlebk>, 97.

²²⁷ “Lead : 12 Gospel Principles for Leadership in the Church: Covenant Discovery,” 77.

Speak of rest. She includes only two sentences on the necessity of sleep, makes one comment about Sabbath-keeping, and does not suggest a sabbatical.²²⁸

²²⁸ Proeschold-Bell and Byassee, *Faithful and Fractured*, 76.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore how pastors who experience distress remain in pastoral ministry after receiving the benefits from a sabbatical. The assumption of this study was that pastors often experience more than normal stress (distress) and that pastors in distress benefit from a sabbatical to recover from distress. In order to address this purpose, the research identified four main areas of focus. These areas include: 1) The kinds of stressors pastors face; 2) How stress moves into distress; 3) How pastors and lay leaders work together to secure a sabbatical for the pastor; and 4) How pastors utilize a sabbatical to help recover from pastoral distress in order to thrive in ministry. To examine these areas more closely, the following research questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How do pastors identify that what they are experiencing has moved past normal stress to unhealthy distress?
2. How do pastors work with lay leaders to secure a sabbatical for the pastors?
3. In what ways and to what extent do pastors benefit from the sabbatical for remaining in pastoral ministry?

Design of the Study

Sharan B. Merriam, in her book *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, defines a general, basic qualitative study as “understanding the meaning that people have constructed; that is, how people make sense of their world and the

experiences they have in the world.”²²⁹ Merriam identifies four characteristics of qualitative research: “The focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive.”²³⁰

This study employed a basic qualitative research design and conducted semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data gathering. This qualitative method provided for the discovery of more comprehensive and descriptive data from participant perspectives in the narrow phenomena of how pastors experiencing distress benefit from a sabbatical.²³¹

Participant Sample Selection

This research required participants able to communicate in depth about the benefits to emotional health of a pastor in taking a sabbatical. To gain data towards best practices, the participants self-reported to the researcher that they had more than five years of experience serving as the pastor of church within the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and were continuing to serve as pastors. They self-reported that they had experienced distress, as defined by the researcher, before they took a sabbatical. Participants also self-reported to the researcher that they experienced benefits from a

²²⁹ Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research : A Guide to Design and Implementation*, Fourth edition., The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (Jossey-Bass, 2016), <https://search.covenantseminary.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip&db=cat10007a&AN=cts.oai.edge.covenant.theological.seminary.folio.ebsco.com.cs00000001.0040.139ac582.8d81.5e4b.850b.ff56ffa2b736&site=eds-live&scope=site>, 15.

²³⁰ Merriam and Tisdell, 15.

²³¹ Merriam and Tisdell, 24.

sabbatical that helped them remain in the pastorate. Therefore, the purposeful study sample consisted of a selection of people from the population of PCA pastors serving in churches then and continuing in ministry.²³² To minimize variation in theology and general pastoral training and practice, which are not the focus of the study, the participants were limited to pastors from the same denomination.

Participants were chosen for a non-probability purposeful type of sample to provide for diversity and commonality in the data collected towards best practices relevant to the research focus.²³³ Eight participants were chosen to provide variation in sources of distress and levels of benefit from sabbaticals used. They also varied in age, geographical region, and ethnicity, which provides a wide spectrum of responses and evidence for the study. Participants were invited to participate via an introductory letter, followed by a personal phone call. All expressed interest and gave written informed consent to participate. In addition, each participant signed a “Research Participant Consent Form” to respect and to protect the human rights of the participants. The Human Rights Risk Level Assessment is “minimal” to “no risk” according to the Seminary IRB Guidelines. The following is a sample of this consent form.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

I agree to participate in the research which is being conducted by Philip S. Kruis to investigate how pastors benefit from a sabbatical, for the Doctor of Ministry degree program at Covenant Theological Seminary. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of the participation, to the extent that they can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the research records, and/or destroyed.

²³² Merriam and Tisdell, 98, 259.

²³³ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 96.

The following points have been explained to me:

- 1) The purpose of the research is to investigate how pastors benefit from a sabbatical.
- 2) Potential benefits of the research may include discovering best practices for scheduling and executing a sabbatical.
- 3) The research process will include a thorough review of the literature on the topic and interviews with eight pastors.
- 4) Participants in this research will participate in a 90-minute interview. One or more questions that will be asked may be given to participants prior to the interview to allow for deeper reflection on significant questions.
- 5) Potential discomforts or stresses: The interview may remind participants of their previous distress in the pastorate, though this is not the focus of the interview.
- 6) Potential risks: No Risk or Minimal Risk Level. Participants may become slightly tired, or emotionally impacted from the research interview. The researcher will slow the interview down if this becomes the case.
- 7) Any information that I provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will my name be reported along with my responses. The data gathered for this research is confidential, and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent, unless otherwise required by law. Audiotapes or videotapes of interviews will be erased following the completion of the dissertation. By my signature, I am giving informed consent for the use of my responses in this research project.
- 8) Limits of Privacy: I understand that, by law, the researcher cannot keep information confidential if it involves abuse of a child or vulnerable adult, or plans for a person to harm themselves or to hurt someone else.
- 9) The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the study.

Printed Name and Signature of Researcher

Date

Printed Name and Signature of Participant

Date

Please sign both copies. Keep one. Return the other to the researcher. Thank you.

Research at Covenant Theological Seminary which involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant should be addressed to: Director, Doctor of Ministry; Covenant Theological Seminary; 12330 Conway Road; St. Louis, MO 63141; Phone (314) 434-4044.

Having completed the IRB requirements for human rights in research and the risk assessment in the Covenant Theological Seminary's "Dissertation Notebook," the Human Rights Risk Level Assessment is "no risk" or "minimal risk" according to the Seminary's IRB guidelines.

Data Collection

This study utilized semi-structured interviews for primary data gathering. The open-ended nature of interview questions facilitated the ability to build upon participant responses to complex issues in order to explore them more thoroughly.²³⁴ Ultimately, these methods enabled this study to look for common themes, patterns, concerns, and contrasting views across the variation of participants.²³⁵

The researcher performed a pilot test of the interview protocol to evaluate the questions for clarity and usefulness in eliciting relevant data. Initial interview protocol categories were derived from the literature but evolved around the explanations and descriptions that emerged from doing constant comparison work during the interviewing process. Coding and categorizing the data while continuing the process of interviewing also allowed for the emergence of new sources of data.²³⁶

The researcher interviewed eight pastors for ninety minutes each. Prior to the interview, the participants received instructions for the interview and two preparatory questions. To accommodate participant schedules, the researcher met at various times of the day and week. The researcher audiotaped the interviews with a digital recorder. By conducting four interviews in a week, the researcher completed the data gathering in the

²³⁴ Merriam and Tisdell, 110.

²³⁵ Merriam and Tisdell, 110.

²³⁶ Merriam and Tisdell, 199.

course of two weeks. Directly after each interview, the researcher wrote field notes with descriptive and reflective observations on the interview time.

The interview protocol contained the following questions.

1. Did your church have a sabbatical policy in place before you needed a sabbatical? Did your church have a sabbatical in your compensation package?
2. The Bible does not use the word stress. It does use the word distress. What was the level of stress you were experiencing prior to taking a sabbatical?
3. Describe how you came to believe the stress you've experienced as a pastor went beyond manageable stress to unmanageable distress.
4. Researchers have identified three factors of burnout—emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and decreased sense of personal accomplishment. Which of these did you experience?
5. As you considered getting help in your distress, tell me about how you ended up deciding to pursue a sabbatical.
 - 5a. Who suggested or prescribed a sabbatical?
 - 5b. Had you taken a sabbatical in the past?
6. What kinds of resistance to the idea of a sabbatical did you experience?
7. Describe your sabbatical.
 - 7a. How long was it?
 - 7b. What did you do?
 - 7c. Did you accomplish what you wanted to? Did you get the rest you needed?
8. What did you find beneficial about your sabbatical towards staying in the pastorate?

9. Did you receive any preparation for reentry?
10. What else do I need to know that I haven't asked?
11. When will your next sabbatical be?

The researcher maintained field notes during the interviews that led to the development of probing questions in order to gain more details, clarification or examples.²³⁷

Data Analysis

As soon as possible and always within one week of each meeting, the researcher had each interview transcribed by using computer software. The software ensured that everything said was preserved for analysis. This study utilized the constant comparison method of routinely analyzing the data throughout the interview process. The ongoing analysis during the interview process allowed the researcher to learn ways to improve his questioning technique.²³⁸ This method also provided for the ongoing revision, clarification, and evaluation of the resultant data categories.²³⁹

When the interviews and observation notes were fully transcribed into computer files, they were coded and analyzed using open coding and analytical coding to form categories. The analysis focused on discovering and identifying common themes, patterns, comparisons, and other taxonomic classes across the variation of participants.

²³⁷ Merriam and Tisdell, 122.

²³⁸ Merriam and Tisdell, 131.

²³⁹ Merriam and Tisdell, 32, 208.

Researcher Position

In qualitative research, Merriam emphasizes that “the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis.”²⁴⁰ Accordingly, she recognizes that “the human instrument has shortcomings and biases that can have an impact on the study.”²⁴¹ As a pastor for almost thirty years, this researcher has experienced a number of stressful and distressing situations. The researcher’s father was a pastor who experienced a number of distressing situations during his career as a pastor. The researcher also has two brothers, a son, and a nephew who serve as pastors. Concern for their well-being and sustainability in the ministry provide some of the researcher’s motivation for this study. The researcher’s experiences and concern for other pastors’ emotional health may have caused biases in the asking of questions and interpreting data. Due to these biases, the researcher may have anticipated that pastors experience certain kinds or types of distressful situations, may have discounted information outside of the researcher’s experience, might have expected more urgency in the pursuit of a sabbatical, or may have expected greater excitement or passion for the benefits of a sabbatical.

The researcher guarded against these biases—against projecting personal life experiences and opinions onto the data.²⁴² Efforts to overcome these biases included ensuring that the researcher reviewed the interview questions before each interview (including additional probing questions added in the field), reviewed the purpose of the study with each participant at the beginning of each interview, and worked to collect all

²⁴⁰ Merriam and Tisdell, 16.

²⁴¹ Merriam and Tisdell, 17.

²⁴² Merriam and Tisdell, 208.

data as objectively as possible. While conducting data analysis, the researcher periodically considered the biases he brought into the study to guard against projecting personal beliefs or life experience onto the data.²⁴³

Study Limitations

Due to limited resources and time, this study is limited to a review of related literature and the interview of eight pastors. The limitations are denominational and motivational. As stated in the previous section, participants interviewed for this research were limited to those who have served as pastors in the PCA, and only men serve as pastors in this denomination. Further research is needed to broaden the participant selection to include women ministry leaders and pastors from other denominations. Discussion of what led pastors to disclose the distress was limited. Further study into the creation of an environment conducive to the disclosure of occupational distress for pastors is needed.

Some of the study's findings may be generalized to other pastors in similar contexts and situations. Readers who desire to generalize some of the particular aspects of these conclusions should consider the similarities and the differences of this context to their particular context. As with all qualitative studies, readers bear the responsibility to determine what can be appropriately applied to their context. The results of this study may also have implications for congregants in other helping fields such as medicine, education, and social services.

²⁴³ Merriam and Tisdell, 208

Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors who experience distress remain in pastoral ministry after receiving benefits from a sabbatical. This chapter provides the findings of the interviews of eight pastors and reports on common themes and relevant insights pertaining to the research questions. To address the purpose of this study, the following research questions guided the qualitative research.

1. How do pastors identify that what they are experiencing has moved past normal stress to unhealthy distress?
2. How do pastors collaborate with lay leaders to secure a sabbatical?
3. How do pastors benefit from a sabbatical to help prevent or heal from pastoral distress?

Introductions to Participants and Context

With the purpose statement and the literature review, eight pastors were enlisted to participate in this study. All names and identifiable participant information have been changed to protect their identities. The pastors ranged in age from their mid-40s to their mid-70s, and all participants were male. The congregations they served when the sabbatical was taken ranged in size from under 100 to over 2000. Two denominations and three of the four US time zones were represented by these eight pastors. These pastors had experienced increasing stress becoming distress, benefitted from a sabbatical, and remained in full-time, vocational ministry as pastors.

From Stress to Distress

The first research question asked, “How do pastors identify that what they are experiencing has moved past normal stress to unhealthy distress. For some of the pastors, there was a defining moment or event that moved them past normal stress to distress. One pastor experienced distress when a colleague revealed his deep journey of distress. Steve notes, “I think probably when Rick went into his dark valley, that was a wakeup call to all of us. That group began to move from head to heart, to shooting up flares, and being more honest and authentic about who really knows me and what's going on with me. Being in the community of some people that really moved into their own brokenness, made it easier for me to go towards mine.”

The expectations placed on pastors during the COVID crisis played a role in moving pastors from stress to distress. Sam asserted, “We did well through COVID. Our unity as a church really shown through. We had a couple families leave that I was really glad to see go, just because they were so uncharitable. It was clear even before COVID hit that these people were going to not be happy. But then when COVID hit, they needed to go somewhere else.”

Chuck described the combustible nature of loneliness in ministry. He said, “I think there is an epidemic of male loneliness and lack of friendships for men, whether they're in pastoral ministry or not. If they're in pastoral ministry, it's like you throw jet fuel on the loneliness.” What Chuck described, Archie experienced. Archie reported, “Yeah, I was definitely in distress. I felt very alone. I felt like everything was up to me. I think I'm still broken from that period. I just cried so much. I was so alone.”

Doug asserted that he had been told he could not have friends in the church during his undergraduate studies. “One of the professors made a comment, ‘Be very careful that you don't have special friends in your church because you'll make others jealous.’ I remember thinking, ‘I will not accept that, because the model I have is Jesus of Nazareth, and he had 12 close friends, and an inner group within the 12.’ Apparently, Jesus didn't give a damn that he was closer to three of them, and I thought, if Jesus didn't care, I'm not going to accept what the professor is saying. It is the lack of friends that's our recipe for either burnout or moral failure or both.”

A key relationship that fights isolation and loneliness exists between a pastor and his pastor. In their books, *Every Pastor Needs a Pastor*, *The Care of Souls*, and *Lead*, McBurney, Senkbeil, and Tripp state that every pastor needs a pastor.²⁴⁴ “Every baptized soul needs care and cure.”²⁴⁵ Pastors offer care to the souls of those in their congregation, but who offers this care to the pastors? Pastors need to hear the guidance and admonition of God's law and the consolation of the gospel. They need more than allies; they need confidants who will listen, respond with the truth, and reassure distressed souls of God's love and grace.

A sabbatical affords the pastor time to develop a relationship with a pastor who will shepherd him. Senkbeil offers several questions for a pastor to consider when seeking a pastor for himself:

²⁴⁴ “Lead : 12 Gospel Principles for Leadership in the Church: Covenant Discovery.” 25. Louis McBurney, *Every Pastor Needs a Pastor* (Word Books, 1977). Title page. “The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor's Heart,” accessed March 4, 2025, <https://eds-p-ebSCOhost-com.search.covenantseminary.edu/eds/ebookviewer/ebook/bmx1YmtfXzIyMDY5NTVfX0FO0?sid=bc22d9c7-2c6c-4354-bf69-ddbf822c89b4@redis&vid=4&format=EK&rid=4>, 208.

²⁴⁵ “The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor's Heart,” 238.

So how to proceed, then, in seeking a pastor for yourself? I advise men to use their eyes and ears. How does the pastor you're considering view the congregation he serves? Is it clear he's able to love his people despite their weaknesses, with all their warts and blemishes? Is he a man of theological integrity and good humor, who takes himself lightly, but his office seriously? Does he demonstrate a healthy reverence for the word and the sacraments as instruments of God's Spirit in creating and sustaining faith? Does he present himself as a servant of Christ and steward of God's mysteries? If so, approach him with the request to meet with you regularly to receive the gifts of God: to listen to you, pray with you, bless you, or hear your confession as needed.²⁴⁶

Another pastor will know firsthand the joys and stresses of pastoral work. The pastor's pastor can empathize and provide camaraderie and understanding. He can shepherd the heart of the pastor.

For others, the movement from stress to distress was due to the slow buildup of stressors at work and home. Archie acknowledged that the accumulation of stress in ministry greatly affected him. "Those first six years were really terrible. The Lord blessed, and the church grew. And we were financially stable, you know, self-supporting. But it was just so hard. I was in a pretty bad place. I thought of leaving the ministry, but I can't do anything else. I was stuck. I wanted out, but there's just no place I could go. Yeah, I was definitely in distress. I felt very alone. It felt like everything was up to me. Every time we added a staff member, I felt like their wellbeing depended on my performance. All the things I thought were going to make it feel better made it feel worse. You know, getting our own building, our own property, bringing on staff, bringing on new programs, or whatever. At the end of the day, it was just more weight on my shoulders. Yeah, I would definitely use distress." He conceded, "I just spent all my time blowing up my personality and trying to dominate every room that I was in, so that I got

²⁴⁶ "The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor's Heart," 239.

to where I really hated being in any kind of group, punished my family a lot because I'd be so tired. I was just so tired all the time, and you know, they could just feel my withering disappointment.”

Conflict with staff and/or lay leadership accounted for the distress a number of the pastors experienced. Steve remarked, “I did have one of my associates that began to, in an unhealthy way, betrayal might be too strong a word, but he really began to try to exert influence and put himself in a situation of power.” Archie reports that he entered a difficult situation. “I fell into a nest of sociopaths. The guy who recruited me here was a scam artist. He was crazy, literally. My youth minister/worship leader, who was incredibly charming and charismatic, was extremely immature. A week after moving here my wife told me coming here was a mistake. There were good things too, and some great people, very generous people. The whole mess with my music minister was when I'd gotten the most distressed. I just couldn't fire him. I should have just fired him and moved on with life. I couldn't, and he kept trying to manipulate me.”

Matt revealed that his distress resulted from church splits the church had endured prior to his coming and conflict with the remaining staff. “About two years before I came on staff, the church went through a couple different church splits. One was when the pastor was kind of forced out. That caused a bunch of people to leave. When they brought another guy on staff, that created a second split because the church said, ‘Hey, you shouldn't hire somebody before you hire a senior pastor.’” Matt worked on the relationship with the one remaining staff member, but he was difficult to work with. “After five years, I finally said to the lay leaders ‘Guys, he's got to go. This isn't working. He needs to find somewhere else to work.’ The lay leaders agreed but didn't enforce his

firing. I was losing sleep. He's so difficult. I was done. The pastor in question submitted a report to the higher church court accusing me of being spiritually and emotionally abusive. I was barely functioning at that point...I just felt so tired, like I had no energy to do anything. And so, yeah, that was without doubt, emotional exhaustion that I was experiencing.”

None of the eight pastors had difficulty admitting that they had experienced a high level of stress, but it often took someone close—a wife, friend, or colleague—to tell them they were in distress. Doug conceded, “I had my best friend and my wife both tell me, you seem depressed. You need to talk to a doctor.” Steve recounted that his wife had been seeking help working through childhood sexual abuse issues by doing story work. She challenged Steve to join her, saying, “I want to get healthy with you, but I will keep getting healthy without you.” Steve responded, “When a primary relationship says, ‘Look, you’re not healthy, and we need to really look at this.’ The Lord used my wife to move me towards getting help.” Sam revealed that a friend identified his distress. He said, “There was one time we were getting together for beers and cigars, and he said, ‘You need to talk to the elders and ask for some time off.’ And I said, ‘Why?’ He said, ‘You’re somewhere else. I can see it in your eyes. You need to go talk to them right now.’”

Three Factors in Distress

To aid the pastors in identifying their distress, the three factors revealed in the Maslach Burnout Inventory—emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and decreased sense of personal accomplishment—were discussed. This researcher presented emotional exhaustion to the participants as the point when emotional intelligence wanes. Picking up

on others' feelings is more difficult, as is personal gauging of feelings. Or, oftentimes feeling numb is preferable to engaging the depth of emotional turmoil at hand. Such markers may indicate a lack of ability to empathize with other people, precipitate emotional outbursts beyond what would be right for that situation, or evoke less of a response when the situation might have required more emotion. Depersonalization was presented as not wanting to be around people as much. A typical attitude would assume: "I'm good. I've done enough. I don't need to see these people ever again. I have had enough of people." People become projects to fix or problems to avoid. Or, alternately, depersonalization presents as a loss of personal place and presence, especially when attending to others' needs. A decreased sense of personal accomplishment was presented as feeling like people aren't listening and a loss of voice. The expectation of accomplishing any concrete goals is low or non-existent.

Emotional Exhaustion

Many of the eight pastors identified emotional exhaustion as a primary factor in their distress. Steve observed, "When we planted our church, it went through such exponential growth. We had several years of little 'r' renewal that was really stunning. I ended up preaching multiple services every Sunday for over a year. It was really neat. My experience of stress into distress just caught up with me. When you're really enjoying what you're doing, you can still go to a place of burnout and not be aware of it. I was having fun but not taking care of myself."

Chuck used the term "omni-competent" to describe the expectations placed on pastors that can lead to emotional exhaustion. He charged, "I can't be at all places at all times, because I'm a finite human being. Someone is going to be disappointed. I can

apologize and say, 'I really wanted to be there.' But their expectations, their disappointment, and their hurt and unforgiveness are real." Sometimes the emotional exhaustion was the result of expectations the pastor had placed on himself. Chuck admits, "I'm not going to verbalize this to others, but maybe I believe that I can navigate vocational ministry without failure and without disappointing people." Archie struggled with disappointing people. "I was always obsessed with anybody that might be disappointed with me. The church was growing. It was doing really well. But if there was one person I thought was disappointed with me, I would be obsessed. I'd be so disappointed. I cried a lot and didn't have control of my emotions. I cried a lot. I lost my temper, a lot. Couldn't sleep at night, pretty bad insomnia. I would lose it in meetings with lay leaders."

Jeff's emotional exhaustion began in his previous call. "The church had split pretty much right down the middle, and there were a lot of trust issues that were still there; they were just under the surface. They thought they had addressed them. I resigned. I don't know how much longer I would have been able to stay. If I had, it might have caused me to question my call to ministry." Jeff faced significant challenges in his new call after facing exhaustion in his previous call. "We faced some challenges in the church that came to a head. There were a few members who did not care for me, and there were challenges within our presbytery, one pastor being disciplined, and another burning out."

Depersonalization

Some mentioned depersonalization as the primary factor in their distress. Sam explained that for him, "Yeah, it was probably depersonalization, I just want to go be a mailman. I just want a job where I'm by myself. I think emotionally, I was not exhausted."

There was the absence of joy, and I realized I had been missing something that I didn't even realize I had lost. Yeah, the depersonalization was a biggie.”

Jeff remarked, “As far as being more withdrawn, I certainly experienced that. I just wanted to show up on Sundays and do the work. And I wanted to be siloed Monday through Friday. I found myself doing fewer pastoral visits and pastoral work. And I've always been pretty good about balancing the teaching, discipleship, preaching, part of our call, with the shepherding, pastoral side of things. That pendulum swung for a season, and that was noticeable to our lay leaders.”

Steve added, “It wasn't the kind of thing where I would just hate to get up and go to work then come home and just sink into the chair kind of thing, but the tank got so low that I could tell I was reacting in certain situations disproportionately. And I had shifted into some unhealthy patterns of detaching myself and just trying to medicate in different ways. I felt safest and most comfortable when I had the microphone in my hand. But the more the church grew up to a large number of people—all the dynamics of leadership, of new people wanting time with you—you finally get to the point where your emotional capacity to be present and even want to be with people diminishes. Yes, I definitely experienced a lot of that. I got myself into things with easy payoff. I moved away from some of the more important commitments we need to make relationally. It became easier to hang out with some people than to really pour into some primary relationships, like with my leaders.”

Depersonalization can occur when pastors feel their identity is wrapped up in their role as pastor. “I only knew who I was when I was at work, and so my personality was so wrapped up, to some degree still is wrapped up, in being a pastor. I didn't know who I

was. I didn't know if I could be myself. You know, I would just kind of figure out who I needed to be in the moment and be that. My wife told me, 'I used to dread Saturdays because I did not know who you were going to be.'”

Decreased Sense of Personal Accomplishment

Few mentioned decreased sense of personal accomplishment as the primary factor in their distress. One of the pastors admitted, “I have always felt like I have no idea if I'm doing any good. For the whole time I've been ordained, I just feel like I have no idea if I'm doing any good, because you don't see revivals. You don't see marriages being restored at the drop of a hat. You don't see any of that stuff.”

Summary of Moving from Stress to Distress

The interviews with these eight pastors revealed that each of them had moved from stress to distress prior to securing and realizing the benefits of a sabbatical. Defining moments, the buildup of stressors at home and work, conflict with leadership, and residual distress from previous calls accounted for much of the distress pastors experienced. Despite their distress, they often required someone else to bring their distress to their attention. In addition, discussing the three factors of burnout listed by Maslach helped the pastors find categories for understanding their distress. Most experienced emotional exhaustion, fewer experienced depersonalization, and even fewer experienced a decreased sense of personal accomplishment. Having considered how the eight pastors moved from stress to distress, attention will now be given to securing a sabbatical for the pastor through collaborative leadership.

Securing a Sabbatical Through Collaborative Leadership

The second research question sought to determine “How do pastors work with lay leaders to secure a sabbatical for the pastors?”

Initiating the Sabbatical Discussion

The interviews conducted with these eight pastors revealed that the issue of securing a sabbatical for the pastor can originate from any of the stakeholders.

Some discussions surrounding securing a sabbatical for the pastor were initiated by the pastor himself. To secure a sabbatical, five of the eight pastors initiated discussions about a sabbatical policy or requested an immediate sabbatical themselves. Doug explained, “I took a sabbatical after ten years, and I requested it at the ten-year mark. I took one after twenty years, but again, I requested it. We had no written policies.”

One pastor reported that other pastoral staff at the church initiated the securing of sabbaticals for the pastoral staff. Matt reported that the sabbatical issue came from a denominational care-of-pastors team that suggested that he take a sabbatical.

Jeff described how the sabbatical issue was initiated by one of his lay leaders, “I’ve got a great group of elders. We faced some challenges in the church that came to a head. There were a few members who did not care for me, and that coincided with issues in our area, one pastor being disciplined, and another burning out. One of our lay leaders said, ‘We don’t want this to happen to you. We know the heat has been turned up for a year now.’ He proposed a sabbatical policy. He drew from three or four different churches, and we finetuned it for our church. He recognized my distress before I did. I probably wouldn’t have said anything. The church had not had a sabbatical policy, and I was fearful of how it might be received. Something about sabbatical came up on a social

media site, and people have very strong opinions, sometimes negatively, and maybe that was something in the background. But he took the proactive position, seeing it was necessary.”

A family member or friend may be the first to recognize that the pastor is in distress as well as the first to suggest seeking a sabbatical. Doug revealed that his doctor first suggested that he take a long vacation. Steve credits his wife for bringing it up.

Regardless of who initiated the sabbatical discussion, lay leaders responded enthusiastically. In Sam’s case, “The church just said, ‘We want you to do it.’ There were no strings attached. The church said, ‘You can have up to \$8,000, as a stipend, and we’re going to continue to pay your salary and everything.’” Doug’s experience was similar. “My church can’t pay me what I’m worth, but they can pay me what they pay me now and let me not work. They just can’t pay me what the big church pastor gets. And that’s what inspired me to have that conversation with the lay leaders. And the lay leaders were like, ‘We’ll give you \$2000 to boot.’”

Resistance

Some of the pastors experienced resistance in their efforts to secure a sabbatical. Matt reported, “I received a lot of resistance from a couple lay leaders. I came to find out later that one was actively working against me. And then another leader was saying, ‘With COVID, we don’t think we should give you a sabbatical, because we need you here right now. We need you to step it up.’ I was sympathetic to that, but I was so exhausted I couldn’t do it. I was supposed to get twelve weeks of sabbatical and ended up getting ten. That wasn’t a huge deal, but it was a compromise.”

Jeff stated, “I think there were a few members of the church who didn't favor the idea and let a lay leader know, but for the most part, the leaders all were on board, excited about implementing this, happy for me, wanting to care for me and my family. There was no intramural tension between the lay leaders and me. They went above and beyond.”

The resistance Archie experienced did not come as a surprise to him, “The ones who were just kind of resisting me, resisted the sabbatical. Some people who didn't understand what [sabbaticals] were didn't like it. And, some people used that as an opportunity to leave the church.”

Negotiation

Negotiating to secure a sabbatical for the pastor took different paths with the eight pastors. Sam noted the importance of working with lay leaders well in advance. He described his approach: “I do one-on-ones with my officers monthly, and I had been priming the pump, so to speak, for a while before it came to the board level. We attempted to secure a grant so the pump was already primed with the congregation as well. I was giving the lay leaders stuff to read about sabbaticals. I needed the lay leaders to be champions for it, not just willing to go along. They needed to be fully persuaded, because they would have to be able to champion it to the congregation. You want them to be so much in support of it that they would say things maybe even more enthusiastically than you would say them.”

Sam acknowledged that the congregation's interests must be addressed. “We had opportunity for people to ask questions. I talked about what a sabbatical is. One of the leaders talked about how this is going to benefit the church. I talked about some of the

ways in which I thought was going to benefit my wife and myself. A couple professors in the church who saw a sabbatical as a working thing, took some time to see the difference, but they are on board. There's another family that just never got on board, but the husband works a crazy amount of hours and doesn't get much of a break. No one left the church, let alone raised much of a fuss over this. I felt very supported by the congregation, and the elders were 100 percent on board.”

Peter negotiated with the lay leaders for the provision of a sabbatical, taking his personal interests, their interests, and the interests of the congregation into account: “I told the deacons and the elders, ‘You guys had this in the previous pastor’s call. I’m going to take a sabbatical. I’m giving us all a year’s notice. I have no intention of looking for a call anywhere else. I’m not trying to get out of anything, but I need a three-month sabbatical. This is when we would like to take it.’ And so that gave them a whole year to prepare. I had to get the concept in their head.” Peter made sure they had pulpit supply, that everybody knew who was doing what and when, and communicated the plan clearly. “Then I pointed out to the lay leaders, ‘You will have to carry the load of going to the hospital and going to see people.’ And I didn’t get any pushback.”

Doug employed direct language to secure his sabbatical. “I said to them, ‘You know, I’m getting ready to celebrate our ten-year anniversary. And I know what gift I want you to give me, and I want to tell you.’ One leader laughed, and she said, ‘You’re going to tell us what to give you?’ She goes, ‘Why would you do that?’ I said, ‘Because I know what I need, and you don’t, and if I don’t tell you, you’re not going to give it to me, and I’m going to be bitter, and it’s going to be my fault. So, I’m going to tell you what I need, because you don’t know.’” Doug told them he needed time off with pay. “And

somebody said, ‘Okay, in addition to your regular pay, do you need an additional stipend?’ I said, ‘What do you mean?’ He said, ‘Well, it’s going to cost you money to rent this VRBO.’ And they’re like, ‘Well, if we give you 2000 would you take it?’ I’m like, ‘Oh, I’ll take it.’”

Steve described the process he and his lay leaders took. “It worked out that we settled on how long and what that would look like, and as the Lord often does, there were some tweaks to that, providentially, as it went on, but that was a part of his plan as well. No change in remuneration, benefits, etc. There were some challenges, of course, that emerged as we planned it, but it actually got executed. I’m glad I had elders that loved me, my family, enough to say, yes, let’s do this.”

Summary of Collaborative Leadership Securing a Sabbatical

Pastors working with lay leaders to secure a sabbatical for the pastor must consider the four dynamics of politics: power, interests, negotiation, and ethical implications. None of the eight pastors had sabbatical policies in place before needing a sabbatical. The concept of a sabbatical was introduced through family, friends, or colleagues through relational power.

Having considered how the eight pastors collaborated with lay leaders to secure a sabbatical for the pastor, attention will now be given to benefits of sabbaticals that allow pastors to remain in ministry.

Benefits of Sabbaticals that Extend Ministry

The third research question addressed the question, “In what ways and to what extent do pastors benefit from the sabbatical leave for remaining in pastoral ministry?”

This question seeks to reveal the best practices employed during a sabbatical that promote rest, rejuvenation, and restoration to extend ministry passion.

Planning the Sabbatical

Intentional planning is vital to a successful sabbatical. One pastor admitted, “I feel really undertrained in how to do sabbatical well. Even though I’ve done two, I’m honestly ignorant.” Interviews with these pastors revealed two core areas of sabbatical planning: sabbatical activities and preparing for reentry.

Sabbatical activities

The term “sabbatical activities” appears oxymoronic on the surface. However, seeking rest, rejuvenation, and restoration requires opportunities for these to be recovered. As initial efforts to plan sabbatical activities commence, rhythms or stages of a sabbatical should be considered. Interviews revealed that these stages can be identified as recovery, restful activity, and reentry. Many of the pastors interviewed remarked that the first few weeks are dominated with the need to recover from the distress that they had experienced. Peter stated, “It took me two weeks to finally just calm down and not be the pastor and actually just enjoy my wife and not be thinking about church every day and thinking about sermon prep and people having issues and all that stuff. It took me about two weeks to unwind. I didn’t realize that I was really that bunched up inside.” Matt agreed. He said, “The first month of the sabbatical, I was still thinking every day about the church, and it took time to finally get to the place where I turned it off, and I wasn’t thinking about it every day.” Jeff concurred. “The first couple of weeks I almost did nothing.”

After recovering from distress, pastors were free for several weeks to enjoy planned restorative activities. Again, Peter observed, "...it was a three-month sabbatical, so I feel like at least two of those months, probably two and a half, I really was having a delightful time and very restful and enjoyable." Finally, the last few weeks tended to focus on preparing for re-entry.

The activities in which these eight pastors engaged were varied, revolving around four common themes: family, rest, hobbies and reading.

Family

Reconnecting with family members was a stated goal of many of the pastors. Archie conceded, "I just spent all my time blowing up my personality and trying to dominate every room that I was in, so that I got to where I really hated being in any kind of group, punished my family a lot because I'd be so tired. I was just so tired all the time, and you know, they could just feel my withering disappointment."

One pastor took his family to the beach for the entire sabbatical and just played for several weeks. "Just play. Just enjoy the family. I figured I owed it to them."

Archie, Peter, Sam, and Steve shared similar stories of renewal with their wives. Archie explained, "Relearning how to listen to my wife probably did the most for our marriage. We took the kids to camp, and then it was just me and my wife for a while. One of the things my coach taught me to do is go to lunch with my wife every week and ask her, 'How have you been experiencing me this week?' And I had to shut up and listen to everything that she said, and everything she said was valid, and I couldn't respond to anything she said, I just had to listen. That was good, because my personality had gotten so big that my personality was consuming hers. Her entire life had been responding to

me. Seeing how unhealthy that was, I wanted to change.” Peter said, “I realized I needed to focus on my wife and just enjoy her because she gets lost in the mix all the time. So, I spent time doing whatever she wanted to do, going where she wanted to go, talking with her, working out what we would do, and that was enjoyable. That was part of the restfulness, just being with her. Because we were not in a hurry, we spent a lot of nights sitting around a campfire, talking about us and getting older and dreams and plans. I was focusing more on her. We did family worship every night, just her and me. Those were delightful.” Sam reported, “The big centerpiece event was our trip to Europe. We were there for two weeks just my wife and me. We did a lot of domestic travel as well.” He added, “We already had a devotional life together, but that four months was really awesome, because we had extended time to pray together. We’ve always, by God’s grace, had a great friendship, and so having four months of just hanging out was amazing.” Steve put it this way: “I got to spend a good part of the sabbatical watching my wife blossom. I get life watching this life partner who’s given up so much come alive. The lay leaders were generous in saying, ‘Yes, we’re so glad you are wanting to use your sabbatical to love your wife well.’ And so that’s what we went with.”

Doug emphasized the necessity of making the family a priority, “I kept saying to myself, if the option is between read a book or spend time with the kids, I realized I could go to the coffee shop and read a book anytime, or I could go hang with the kids. I felt like Jesus was saying, “Time is limited. You can write a book later. You can’t hang out with your kids later.” Pastors with children in the home took trips with the whole family.

Rest

Rest came in various ways for various pastors. Matt claimed, “I feel like the important things for me regarding sabbaticals are the need to rest and the need to do something that distracts you.” Archie testified, “The first two weeks, I stayed at home, and my coach’s advice was just sleep. The first question you should ask yourself every morning is, could I possibly sleep longer? And if the answer is yes, then do it, and so I did that, and that was great. I slept until 10 every day for two weeks.” He continued, “I went out to the lake by myself and spent a week at a friend’s lake house. The main thing was just learning to rest while working, while fellowshiping, while being at events.”

For one of the pastors, rest came during activity. He said, “Fishing would be the rest piece for me. When I was fishing, especially if I went by myself, that was pure rest.”

Hobbies

Archie played a lot of golf. Doug said, “I love saltwater fishing, and I spent a lot of time saltwater fishing. That's why I chose the beach. I spent a lot of time doing surf fishing. All of that charged my batteries.” Peter took up wood carving. He reasoned, “You've got to have a hobby, something that is satisfying and quicker. Pastoral ministry is a long-term thing, and you have no idea if you're doing any good.” Some pastors did projects around the house on their sabbatical. Matt explained, “I did a major home renovation. I find that doing things like woodworking forces my mind to shut off other things.” Another pastor enlisted his father to help tear out a deck and replace it. Jeff took up golf to get away from work and to enjoy time with other men. He said, “I took up golf. I played as a young man but didn’t play for years. When I took my sabbatical, a counselor I was talking to asked me two questions. He said, ‘What are your hobbies? And when do you spend time with other men that's not church related?’ I said, ‘I don't have

any hobbies. My hobbies are getting my kids from one activity to the next. And I've got good relationships, but not consistent, good friendships outside of the church.' He said, 'Well, that's your job; find that. So, I took up golf because, one, it got me outside. It was also something that I could enjoy and use to build a handful of friendships, to just spend time with guys, again, not ministry related. I have a friend I've played with ever since. Unless the weather prevents it, we've played at least once a week.'

Reading

For Peter, he read the Bible. "I had read through the Bible forty plus times, but because I don't have to go anywhere and had no time frame, why don't I read for my own growth as a disciple?" He also found rest in reading other books and writing. "I probably read a little more of history than I normally had done in the past, because we were seeing historical sites." As for writing, he said, "I compiled a book of prayers and wrote another book. It helped me to put all my thoughts together all that came out of the sabbatical."

Sam reported, "I had my list of books that I wanted to read. I ended up reading just two books, but I read them both twice just because they were that impactful." Doug found the same to be true for him. "I had books that I wanted to read. I didn't read more than one or two of them."

Matt found that his reading interests changed during his sabbatical. "I did some specific reading, but it was pretty light reading, like Eugene Peterson's, *The Pastor*. You're not going to find me reading church growth books or any of that sort of stuff on my sabbatical. I really didn't want to think about that."

Re-entry

Those returning from sabbatical commented that the most neglected part of their sabbatical plan was their reentry into the life of the congregation.²⁴⁷ Re-entry proved difficult in some cases due to disruptions to the sabbatical.

A sabbatical lends an extended time away from daily duties for the pastor to receive the benefits of sabbatical, namely renewal and rest. When the sabbatical is shortened or disrupted, the goals of sabbatical are thwarted.

Some of the pastors expressed frustration at having their sabbatical disrupted. Sam reported, “Unfortunately, we did have a moral failure amongst the staff, and I had to come back two weeks early and step into some pretty difficult things. And I had to reengage a week before that to squelch efforts among the lay leaders to enter into political rhetoric. I was back engaged about three weeks before I should have been with some difficult things.” Chuck’s sabbatical was disrupted significantly. “Family members were in a terrible accident two weeks into the sabbatical. Six weeks into my sabbatical, we had a member sexually assault another member, and I was brought in six weeks into the sabbatical for that as well.” Steve reported, “When I actually started the sabbatical, I had to come back several Sundays early into the sabbatical to preach through the capital campaign program. Then, toward the end of the sabbatical I wrote a book with a friend but ended up writing his part as well. I was glad to do it. It was nobody’s fault.”

Churches and lay leaders must understand that just as a disrupted nap is not a nap, a disrupted sabbatical is not a sabbatical. Time lost to attend to church duties demands a

²⁴⁷ A. Richard Bullock, *Clergy Renewal: The Alban Guide to Sabbatical Planning* ([Bethesda, Md.] : Alban Institute, 2000), <http://archive.org/details/clergyrenewalalb0000bull>, 52.

reset or restart to the sabbatical. Every effort must be made to eliminate disruptions from the sabbatical.

Sam returned from his sabbatical early due to a crisis within the congregation. He stated, “Unfortunately, we did have a moral failure amongst the staff, and I had to come back two weeks early and step into some pretty difficult things.” Matt had a lot to deal with when he came back from sabbatical. “I had to hit the ground running, for sure, there was no easing in.” For Peter, COVID disrupted his reentry. “We returned in December of 2019, and by mid-January we had to deal with people in our church screaming at us because we were wearing masks, telling us we're wearing face diapers. And then the people who wanted everybody to wear masks were mad at us because we didn't mandate masks, and we had to deal with the political rhetoric and vaccinations. It felt like the sabbatical was wonderful, and everything I gained from it blew up.” Jeff reported, “I don't remember it being herkie jerky when I came back, any kind of major issues. But I do know that it was strange. I should have had a better plan. I should have had some coaching, or someone who counseled me that entering back into your normal work and pastoral profession is going to be a little more challenging than you might expect. I was just ignorant of that.”

While some pastors experienced difficulty with re-entry, others found it effortless. One pastor saw improvements in the church staff. He laughed, “They hired a church administrator. The staff said that by the time I'd been gone two weeks, they went to the lay leaders and said, ‘We had no idea how much the pastor did. You've got to hire somebody.’ Well, that was pretty funny, but I was doing too much. I was doing

everything. The only things that I wasn't doing were printing the bulletins and depositing the money. It was crazy.”

Archie remarked that his coach “...told me to not go full speed. He said the first two weeks will be really hard. You should work half days and ease into it. Now, I wish I could have done that, but it really wasn't an option. My assistant pastor was very immature, and there's just no way I could do that.”

In order to ease re-entry, one pastor gave reports to the congregation and lay leaders throughout the sabbatical. He also gave a report when he returned. “I got a video, a little slideshow I did, to show the church when I got back.”

Remaining in Ministry

The task of this research was to determine if the benefits of sabbatical allowed the pastor to remain in full-time vocational ministry. The eight pastors interviewed remained in ministry as pastors and affirmed the benefits of sabbaticals to extend ministry. Archie claimed, “I enjoy ministry more and do it better. I have developed teams to do the work and share the work. So, not only am I still in it, but I'm a much better pastor and let people do things. I'm a lot better, a lot healthier.” Matt saw his emotional exhaustion dissipate. “I did feel like I came back recharged and refreshed. I was able to refocus on what I was trying to do—trying to reach people.” He found that his recovery helped him be able to put criticism in perspective, encouraging him in his calling. He reported, “It's a tough calling. It requires faithfulness. One of the words that we look forward to hearing is not, ‘You did a great job growing the church,’ right? It's, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant.’”

Steve's experience moved him toward more growth. "It was truly, deeply enriching, and it was used by the Lord to show me, 'You don't just need a break. I'm going to show you in this season where your counseling is going to need to take you. You're gonna discover, through this gift from your generous church, some of the things that really need to be addressed.'" Sabbatical provides the pastor the chance to shift from what controls him to what he controls. Steve said, "The Lord said, 'You know what? Right now, we're going to take you to an even deeper rest that's not as much about your calendar, but about your story. It was a change.' I slept well, got to exercise, you know, it was all good."

The depersonalization Doug had experienced was gone. "I can come back to these same people, not angry at them and [instead] missing them. These are my people. This is my family. I love them. I miss them. It's good to see you guys again. I don't just serve these folks. I serve with these folks. That's my family. These are my friends."

Sam exclaimed, "I feel like it was a really fruitful sabbatical. It exceeded our expectations on every front, on the fun front, on the spiritual renewal front, and on the relational reconnection front."

Matt found that separating from day-to-day ministry for a time was beneficial for remaining in ministry. "Yeah, I would say it was the projects I worked on. It was the completely detaching myself from ministry."

Jeff planned his sabbatical so that he had time alone to rest at the beginning and at the end. He stated, "I really didn't plan anything for the first two weeks and start any projects. I'm gonna let my body kind of readjust, you know? I'm gonna get off my normal sleep schedule and take a nap or read a novel. I tried to sort of do that as bookends, so

any kind of big activities or projects or things that I want to do, or trips the family want to do, I could do that in the middle portion and put those two weeks on each end. I think that served me pretty well.” In addition, Jeff suggested that the change his lay leaders made in their sabbatical policy might be adopted by others. He explained, “When our elders adopted a sabbatical policy, one piece of it is that at any point, up to one month off can be requested in addition to our regular vacation and study leave. You might need to take a month off to rest and recover between sabbaticals. So that was a subsection of our sabbatical policies. It's not the sabbatical per se, but it is up to a month of leave in addition to regular vacation, if it's requested.”

Benefits for the Congregation

Sabbaticals that benefit the congregation benefit the pastor and vice versa. Sam reported, “We had some guest preachers kind of sprinkled throughout the sabbatical. That was really good for our church to hear other voices. It also gave the assistant pastor a chance to develop as a preacher and receive confirmation of his gifts.”

Summary of Benefits of Sabbaticals that Extend Ministry

Keeping the three stages of a sabbatical—recovery, restful activity, and reentry—in mind, the pastor and lay leaders collaborated to plan a sabbatical that brings renewal, rest, and rejuvenation. While the details of a sabbatical were nebulous at the beginning of negotiations, some goals and structure were of benefit. Attention was given to restoration and renewal of relationships that had suffered as the pastor experiences distress. Primary among these relationships was the pastor's relationship with his spouse. Other activities—hobbies, rest, and reading—complimented the emphasis on family.

Reentry into day-to-day ministry after a sabbatical was an overlooked and neglected issue. Preparation for reentry was vital but rarely sought or given. Easing back into the day-to-day routine of ministry life established renewed balance between ministry and family. Enlisting the services of a sabbatical coach, discussed in depth below, was crucial for sabbatical planning and reentry preparation.

The benefits of a sabbatical allowed pastors in distress to remain in ministry. “I enjoy ministry more and do it better. I’m a lot better, a lot healthier.” “I came back recharged and refreshed.” “It was truly, deeply enriching, and it was used by the Lord.” Depersonalization disappeared. “I can come back to these same people, not angry at them and missing them. These are my people. This is my family. I love them.” “It was fruitful and exceeded expectations on every front.” Bookended periods of solitude and intentional rest helped one pastor engage in life-giving activities in the middle.

Congregations benefited from sabbaticals by hearing different voices in the weekly preaching of God’s Word. They developed better leadership skills, filling the gaps left by the pastor on sabbatical. It provided the opportunity for the congregation to get to know, support, and encourage other ministry staff as they took on greater leadership roles.

Summary of Findings

This chapter examined the benefits of sabbaticals for pastors who remained in ministry after experiencing distress. Findings from the interviews of eight pastors revealed a number of significant conclusions. Pastors face a large number of stressors in the course of ministry, often leading to distress. Manageable stress becomes unmanageable distress, requiring that the pastor seek outside assistance to regain health.

Pastors in distress can work successfully with lay leaders to secure sabbaticals. Pastors may be reluctant to bring up the idea of a sabbatical, but lay leaders generally respond enthusiastically. Pastors who secure sabbaticals benefit from the extended period of rest, allowing them to remain in ministry.

In addition to the answers to the research questions, the interviews revealed that of the eight pastors interviewed, none had written, church leadership-approved sabbatical policies prior to the pastor needing a sabbatical. Archie reasoned, “I planted the church, and had always assumed I was going to take a sabbatical every seventh year.” Doug conceded, “We had no written policies. We’ve been running like a church plant for most of our twenty-seven and a half years. I took a sabbatical after ten years, and I took one after twenty years. So, I’ve taken two sabbaticals without a written policy. We now have a written policy, and I’m planning on taking my third sabbatical next year because I want to apply for a grant.” Peter complained, “The previous pastor got a sabbatical in place in his call, but it wasn’t in my call.” Sam maintained, “In a way, I’m the only pastor this church has ever known. Let’s just say the policies when I came were very fluid. It was a young church, and there was nothing in terms of sabbatical, and I didn’t really think about it at all.” Matt clarified, “A sabbatical policy would probably be the wrong phrase. When I came to my current church, I said I had the expectation that at seven years, I’m going to take a sabbatical, but it was never put in writing. We came to a mutual agreement and understanding about it, and it probably should have been put in writing. That was a mistake.” Chuck pointed out, “I served at one church for a number of years in varying capacities and there never was the offer of a sabbatical. There wasn’t a program for sabbatical for staff. When I took a call at another church I was given a sabbatical

because the senior pastor was wanting one for himself. He knew that he had to present it as a program.” Jeff believed, “There was some language about an additional week of study leave after five years and revisiting personal leave after a certain time frame. But there was certainly no sabbatical policy in place.”

The improvement of the pastor’s relationship with his wife was a common benefit reported in the interviews conducted.

One critical finding from the interviews was that pastors should hire a sabbatical coach. Archie claimed, “The most important thing I did was I hired a guy who does sabbatical coaching, and I did exactly what he told me to do. That was extremely helpful and really life changing. We talked every week and then it became every other week. By the end of the sabbatical, we continued to talk once a month for probably two or three years. He taught me how to trust other people, how to rest, how to accept things that weren't perfect. That's the main thing I would say. Get a professional sabbatical coach and do whatever they tell you to do.” Sam had a similar experience with his coach. He said, “I think coaching is so important, to be able to have someone who can help you navigate that reentry and navigate on the front end. I had my plan of how things were going to look, and about three weeks in, things weren't going according to my plan, and to be able to have a coach help me recalibrate was important as well. I would say that the best way to get the most out of your sabbatical is to have somebody to coach you through it.” Steve agreed, “I was so ready for that sabbatical. I was a little bit naive about not having someone coach me on how to be a good steward of this.”

Having considered how the eight pastors moved from stress to distress, collaborated with lay leaders to secure a sabbatical for the pastor, and the benefits of

sabbaticals that extend ministry, attention will now be given to discussing the conclusions and recommendations of this research.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Recommendations

“Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble.” Job 14:1

Men and women, created in innocence, fell and were plunged into a world of distress. No one can escape that stress or distress. The Christian is warned to expect tribulation and suffering. Our Lord tells us, “In this world you will have tribulation.”²⁴⁸ Paul and Barnabas “strengthened the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”²⁴⁹ We are fallen people living in a fallen world amidst fallen people. We long to enter the Kingdom of God. We long for rest. God answers distress with rest.

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors can utilize a sabbatical, secured through the collaboration of leadership, in order to heal from pastoral distress so they could remain in pastoral ministry.

The following research questions guided the research.

1. How do pastors identify that what they are experiencing has moved past normal stress to unhealthy distress?
2. How do pastors collaborate with lay leaders to secure a sabbatical?
3. How do the benefits of a sabbatical allow a pastor to remain in pastoral ministry?

²⁴⁸ John 16:33.

²⁴⁹ Acts 14:22.

Summary of the Study and Findings

This study reviewed relevant literature in three areas—stress and distress, collaborative leadership, and benefits of a sabbatical—and analyzed interview data from eight pastors.

Moving from Stress to Distress

A review of the Bible’s teaching on stress and distress revealed that the Bible does not mention the word “stress,” but it frequently mentions distress. Everyone experiences and learns to manage stress. Manageable stress accumulates until it becomes unmanageable distress, or distress may occur when distressing events transpire. Distress is indicated by a cry for help, a distress call, seeking external help to help manage the distress. This is seen when *sara* or *metsuqah* occur in the Old Testament, and *ananke*, *thlipsis*, or *stenochoria* occur in the New Testament. Though there is a paucity of literature on pastoral or clergy distress, the literature review showed that pastors experience distress at rates like those in other helping fields. The terms “clergy burnout,” “occupational distress,” and “psychological distress” were examined, and the literature revealed that distress experienced by pastors significantly affects their capacity to maintain emotional health, close connection with family, colleagues and congregants, and a sense of personal accomplishment. Such distress, according to the literature, results in low job satisfaction, leaving full-time ministry, or making a substantial change in calling.

Interviews with the eight pastors revealed that they had not considered the difference between stress and distress. They admitted that they were in distress and that the distress they experienced significantly affected each of them. Overwhelming expectations, conflict with lay leaders and congregants, and misguided priorities led to

thoughts of leaving ministry, having no fuel in the tanks, and depersonalization, at which point withdrawal and isolation quickly set in.

Collaborative Leadership

The biblical record was examined regarding collaborative leadership. God intended that his people be led by leaders working together to bring about his mission. Elders came alongside leaders from the beginning. Moses, the many judges, and the newly established monarchy relied on elders and other wise counselors to establish God's chosen people as a nation. Jesus had The Twelve with whom he shared life. He taught, trained, and sent these men out to do ministry in his name. Paul had his co-laborers to count on as he traveled through many afflictions to establish the church.

Realizing that reduced organizational commitment is a consequence often associated with professional burnout, church leaders must take a real interest in securing a sabbatical for the pastor, working together. The literature on collaborative leadership in the church focuses on "the art of getting things done with others."²⁵⁰ Collaborative negotiations between pastors and lay leaders to secure a sabbatical for the pastor proceed best when interests are shared, and power is equal. Securing a sabbatical for the pastor through collaboration with lay leaders mitigates negative ethical implications and provides for positive outcomes.

According to the literature, such collaboration must consider the four dynamics of politics: power, interests, negotiation, and ethical implications. To secure a sabbatical for the pastor, the pastor and lay leaders may learn about a sabbatical through family, friends,

²⁵⁰ Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 18.

or colleagues exerting relational power. However, the pastor and lay leaders must utilize formal power to establish policies that preserve the conclusions of their negotiations. The primary stakeholders involved in securing a sabbatical for the pastor may include the pastor, other ministry staff, formal lay leadership, family and friends of the pastor, and the congregation. The stakeholders possess interests surrounding securing a sabbatical for the pastor, their interests being personal and organizational. Identifying the stakeholders with personal interests naturally involves stakeholders closely associated with the pastor.

Resistance to a sabbatical leave can be moderated through patient instruction on the nature and purpose of a sabbatical for the lay leaders and the congregation. Early discussions with lay leaders reduce confusion, lower anxiety, and build confidence for them and the congregation. Direct communication of the need for a sabbatical may be required. When church leaders collaborate, the church benefits.

Sabbatical

Biblical references to Sabbath and sabbatical were closely examined. God established the pattern for Sabbath when he rested from his work of creation. He set it as an ordinance and a command to be followed when he declared that his people are to keep the Sabbath holy. The command to maintain a Sabbath points forward to a final, continual sabbath in the new heavens and the new earth. God's answer to his people's distress is rest: at present, as we continue our journey on earth, and finally, as we enter his rest upon death or Jesus's return. The pattern for sabbatical every seven years is established in Leviticus, a year long sabbatical for the land to rest.

The literature referring to pastors and sabbaticals highlight the benefits that allow them to remain in ministry. God answers distress with rest; pastors and lay leaders

collaborate to answer the pastor's distress with rest. Rest is found in a sabbatical in which an extended period of time away from the daily rigors of ministry provides opportunities for the pastor to recover, rest, and reenter ministry with renewed passion for ministry. As Robert Saler states in *Planning Sabbaticals*, "The purpose of a pastoral sabbatical is not to produce a certain product, but for the pastor to regain energy and focus and connection to inner spiritual resources—all for the sake of being renewed for a long ministry with their congregation."²⁵¹ One participant remarked, "One of the benefits of a long-term sabbatical is that you're radiating when you come back."

The interviews revealed that when distress is answered with rest, pastors stay in ministry. The benefits of sabbatical were manifold: renewed love for the Lord and his word, reconnection at new and deeper levels of intimacy with wives and children, physically and emotionally rested, establishing new hobbies and new habits and rhythms of sabbath, observing the larger church in its practices, changes to operation systems within the church, all resulting in renewed vigor for ministry.

Discussion of Findings

In this section, the literature and interview research are compared in order to identify how pastors in distress benefit from a sabbatical and remain in ministry.

Recent studies have shown that a worrying proportion of pastors leave ordained ministry burned out, wounded, or emotionally and spiritually damaged, and some never to return to church either as pastors or lay persons.²⁵² Can the benefits of a sabbatical

²⁵¹ "Planning Sabbaticals: A Guide for Congregations and Their Pastors," 5.

²⁵² Jenkins, "Great Expectations, Sobering Realities."

alleviate the distress pastors experience so that they remain in ministry? The answer is, “Yes.”

Each stage of the sabbatical provides benefits for pastors in distress.

Recovery

To recover is to return to a normal state of health, mind, or strength. For a pastor in distress, recovery is marked by returning from unmanageable distress back to manageable stress. This might be described as *saqat*, “resting from labors” provided by a sabbatical. Interviewed pastors indicated that the first two to four weeks of a sabbatical are best spent recovering from distress. During this period, the drastic reduction in demands and expectations brings relief. There is no need for task switching throughout the day. Sleep found in a change of setting becomes much more restorative. Liberation from external criticisms brings peace to anxious hearts and encourages more self-exploration and evaluation.

By far, the greatest benefit of these first few weeks of sabbatical is time. Time free from demands, expectations, tasks, and criticism. Time for rest.

Rest

After time for recovery, the majority of the sabbatical should focus on rest. This “resting for life” portion of the sabbatical comes in many forms: physical rest, emotional rest, and psychological rest. These forms of rest occur in the context of activities that differ from duties as a pastor. The pastor benefits from rest as he employs restful activities with family, in resting, in reclaiming or establishing a hobby, and in reading. Planning and participating in family adventures and activities provides the environment for the pastor to reconnect and renew his relationships with his wife and children.

Deliberate, intentional plans for getting physical rest can be woven throughout the other restorative activities. Pastors have time during sabbatical to take up a hobby they had to set aside for pastoral duties. Or they can take up a new hobby that provides an outlet for forgotten or hidden skills and provides a healthy distraction from the demands of ministry.

Pastoral sabbaticals differ from academic sabbaticals in that academic sabbaticals anticipate that something is produced—research, writing, reports—during the sabbatical. Pastoral sabbaticals anticipate a reduction in production and an increase in personal renewal. The last couple of weeks of the sabbatical should focus on reentry.

Reentry

Reentry may be the least considered aspect of a sabbatical but, when prepared for well, can send the pastor back into the ministry setting with confidence, passion, and excitement. A planned reentry forestalls attempts to shorten the sabbatical by the lay leaders or by the pastor himself. Pastors shouldn't lose one minute of their sabbatical. They need it all. And then, they need to ease back into ministry, go slow, schedule meetings a couple of weeks out after their return. They might give a report to the lay leaders and to the congregation and share with them what they experienced and learned and listen to their experiences.

Three additional findings arose that can be successfully addressed by a sabbatical.

Isolation and Loneliness

Many pastors live like they are on an island. Polity structures can produce isolation as they elevate the lead pastor. Some personalities tend toward isolation out of fear that they will lose their power or from the fear of disappointing others. Some pastors isolate to cover sinful habits; others to conceal self-identified deficiencies. Tripp and

Dodd identify that pastors have a persona they allow others to see while hiding from view the private persona.²⁵³

Isolation and loneliness can be addressed by a sabbatical. Sabbatical furnishes time to heal hurt relationships, rebuild former good relationships, and establish new relationships. Examination of hurt relationships, considering personal contributions to the hurt and ways to apologize and forgive, and acting to restore the relationship can all be completed during a sabbatical.

Pastors experiencing distress find that their primary relationships suffer. Personal and others' expectations, bids for attention, physical, emotional, and spiritual crises, demand that time be given outside the family. A sabbatical provided the time and energy to reinvest in the family, and each looked different based on the life-stage of the family. The sabbatical taken by a pastor with young children will look different than the sabbatical taken by a pastor with older children and much more different for the pastor who has an empty nest.

Renewal and strengthening of the marital dyad counters the isolation and loneliness through God's provision of a helpmate for the pastor. Significant time must be given to renewal of the pastor's most significant relationship. Deepening of the marital relationship was an outcome of sabbatical most pastors mentioned. Counseling, travel, discussing biblical truths, shared time in God's Word, and play were voiced activities that bore much fruit.

Another key relationship that fights against isolation and loneliness is a close friend. Every pastor needs at least one good, lifelong friend. Sabbaticals give pastors time

²⁵³ Dodd, *Survive or Thrive*, 26; Tripp, *Dangerous Calling*, 21.

to reconnect with past friends, to heal broken friendships, or to create new friendships. Pastors who make friends at age 50, 60, or 65 can make lifelong friends. It's just a shorter period of time.

Family Systems

From a family systems point of view, the family functions as a system, and when one part of the system is not functioning well, the rest of the system adjusts. When an individual within the system is in distress, the entire system experiences the distress.

The pastor in distress functions in a primary role in his family, in the church, and often in his community. The rest of the system must react to his distress, disrupting or changing the dynamics of the system. Other primary figures must step into duties and roles that have been jettisoned due to distress.

A sabbatical provides time and space for reestablishing the equilibrium of the system. Planned opportunities for others in the system to exercise leadership and congregational care allow the pastor to rest and renew his passion for ministry. As the pastor regains health and vitality, other figures in the system recalibrate their roles and functions to collaborate with him more effectively.

Recommendations for Practice

In light of the findings described above, every church is well advised to establish a sabbatical policy for their full-time ministry staff. Of the eight pastors interviewed for this research, none had sabbatical policies in place prior to needing a sabbatical. Every church has a duty to have a sabbatical policy in place prior to the pastor needing one.

Pastors need time and space to unload their distress. As pastor and author Ralph Davis writes in his commentary on 1 Samuel, “Our Lord can handle our tears; it won’t

make him nervous or ill at ease if you unload your distress at his feet.”²⁵⁴ A sabbatical should be no less than three months in duration—two to three weeks for recovery, seven to eight weeks for restful activities, and two weeks for reentry. This timeframe gives the pastor freedom to recover from the accumulation of stressors, time to engage in restful activities in solitude or with the family, and time to prepare for reentry into the ministry.

Archie concluded, “What I tell everybody who asks is that a sabbatical is great if you're willing to work on yourself and listen, get input on yourself and make changes, because the job is not going to change. And I think the people I know who have gone on sabbatical, who are really burned out and went on sabbatical, a lot of them quit when they got back, and I think it's because they didn't change, and the job didn't change.”

Pastors preparing for a sabbatical should consider what they must do prior to the sabbatical, during the sabbatical, and upon reentry to ministry.

Prior to Sabbatical

Pastor should limit or eliminate large changes to the staff, church programs, and special events in the months leading up to the sabbatical. One church brought in a new assistant pastor, without the congregation's knowledge, weeks prior to the pastor's departure on sabbatical. “Within two weeks of starting the sabbatical, the suspicions ran crazy. It took time for the lay leaders to calm people down and assure them that the pastor is not leaving. This guy is not going to replace him. But the suspicions were there.” To help remove suspicions, the pastor said, “I started writing a newsletter, and it was very short. I just put in pictures of where we went every week, or every two weeks. I would put in a short diary of what we did and sent it to the whole congregation. My intention

²⁵⁴ Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart*, Focus on the Bible (Christian Focus, 2000), 57.

was to communicate with them so they would go, he's still talking to us, so that means he's not leaving.”

Prior to planning for a sabbatical, a sabbatical coach should be retained. Two of the eight pastors interviewed benefitted from the help of a sabbatical coach. Others decried their lack of coaching or input with their sabbatical planning and structure. A sabbatical coach will provide the pastor with a pre-sabbatical assessment, help set goals and plan sabbatical activities, and prepare for departure. He will provide contact, feedback, and counsel during the sabbatical. And he will prepare the pastor for reentry. A three-month to six-month check-in recalls the benefits of the sabbatical for the pastor.

During the Sabbatical

Three stages of a sabbatical were revealed in the interviews. These three stages—recovery, restful activities, and reentry—provide the pastor in distress the opportunity to reengage with ministry at a fruitful and productive level.

Pastors should set time aside to recover from the distress. They can simply sleep, get counseling, decompress alone, with their wives, or with a trusted friend. As recovery progresses, they can engage in restful activities that foster renewal and relationship. A sabbatical allows for a change in quality and quantity of reading. Reading on sabbatical should be for pleasure and personal growth. Reference books and commentaries should stay on the shelf in the study while non-fiction books on non-ministry fields and fiction books should go on the sabbatical with the pastor. Sevier concludes, “For the pastor, there may be nothing more renewing than being able to participate in, rather than lead, worship for an extended period. Clergy renewal means time to rediscover the spiritual disciplines. It means sitting alone with the scriptures for an extended time. It means

walking in the woods or the desert in an attitude of worship and prayer. It means having the time for a necessary struggle with past mistakes or future decisions. It means making space for God by emptying ourselves of all the things that normally crowd in.”²⁵⁵ They should renew their relationship with God, family and friends—in that order.

After the Sabbatical: Reentry

Pastors should prepare for reentry with intentionality. Reentry into the workplace after three months away from any job can be difficult. Therefore, preparation for reentry is vital. Archie described his reentry this way: “Within weeks of getting back, you're just kind of back in the crap because all this stuff been waiting on you. I came back from the sabbatical, and that's what I've come back to? It was just like all this really heavy stuff had been put on the ‘well, we'll wait till the pastor gets back’ burner. So, not only do you come back to the same job, but you come back to the worst of it, like, stacked up.”

Reentry review questions such as those below should be utilized to help the stakeholders—pastor, the lay leaders, and the congregation—discover what was helpful about the sabbatical. Examples include:

- What went well?
- What did you learn and how do you anticipate using it?
- What surprised you?
- What would you do differently?
- What persons, programs, locations, funding, or comments were most helpful during the sabbatical?
- What is your favorite sabbatical story?²⁵⁶

Those who found reentry to be difficult reported three bits of advice. First, they recommended that pastors go light on scheduling calendar engagements during the first

²⁵⁵ Sevier, “How to Benefit from a Sabbatical,” 12.

²⁵⁶ Bullock, *Clergy Renewal*, 53.

week after returning. Second, they should prepare for a volatile range of emotions upon return. Third, they can expect that the deepest and most significant learnings from the sabbatical may not be immediately evident.²⁵⁷

To facilitate a good reentry, one pastor found it helpful to preach a one-off sermon titled, *Sabbatical Lessons*. As mentioned previously, another pastor showed the congregation a video of activities he had done on his sabbatical.

Establish Sabbath Rhythms

Pastors can use the sabbatical to reorient their sabbath rhythms. During the sabbatical, they could sit under good preaching—with minimal critique -- worship in churches outside their denomination, and take the full day as a day of rest. Weekly sabbath can be difficult but rewarding. They should set clear and workable boundaries around their weekly Sabbath observance and begin to practice them while on sabbatical.

As for their schedules while on sabbatical, pastors ought to determine when time will be scheduled for the Lord and family each day and follow through. They should commit to the following: identify one ministry workday a month to be alone with God, to soak up his presence, and be reminded of his love and grace; take study leave, take all vacation time; start planning for the next sabbatical.

Doug returned from sabbatical determined to maintain sabbath rhythms. He said, “I’m still taking off four weeks every summer, two weeks in the winter, one the fall, one in the spring.” Chuck looks to the example Jesus set. “During his three-year ministry, Jesus didn’t take a three-month sabbatical. But, because of the level of stress and distress and attack and antagonism and betrayal and dysfunction he experienced, he was

²⁵⁷ Bullock, 54.

constantly removing himself physically, emotionally, and physiologically from these situations to protect his humanity.”

Theological Reflection

Finally, understanding sabbatical requires looking at what it foreshadows. The sabbath rest into which God calls his people foreshadows the eternal rest destiny of all of God’s people. The awarding of sabbatical leave points hearts toward a heavenly home around the throne of God in an eternal rest. That heavenly sabbatical rest will provide a rest from all labors as believers are made new.²⁵⁸

There’s a natural flow to how the biblical framework answers distress with rest. Biblical texts present real, personal distress as a narrowing of options, limiting of action, and questioning of choices. As the suffocating pressure mounts, the need for release and respite also rises. The person in distress cries out. The Lord hears from heaven, brings the person into a wide space, opening up options, providing restoration.

This is made clear in Psalm 4:1:

[1] Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness!
You have given me relief when I was in distress.
Be gracious to me and hear my prayer!

Relief given by the Lord is a “growing wide” or “growing large.” The cry of distress is answered with the restoration found when the pressure is released. Instead of everything narrowing, it is now opening up -- with more options, more choices.

Further, in Psalm 18 verse 6, David cries out in his distress:

²⁵⁸ Rev. 14:13.

In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears.²⁵⁹

David experienced distress as he was being pursued by Saul. From his temple, the Lord heard David's distress; his cry reached his ears. David described how God brought deliverance: "He brought me out into a broad place; he rescued me, because he delighted in me."²⁶⁰

It is in this broad place that pastors find freedom from the crushing, defeating, and grave distress they experience. Such deliverance from distress we now know in part; when we enter our final rest, we will know deliverance from distress to the full.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study focused on the challenges faced by pastors and how a sabbatical is of benefit to them. As with any study, there are limitations as to how extensive the research can be.

Given that there is a dearth of literature on pastoral distress, this common occurrence should be a subject of further research. Burnout is often equated with distress; further research to differentiate burnout and distress could prove valuable.

Pastors are exposed frequently to secondary trauma, the indirect experience of or exposure to trauma. Additional research into the effects of secondary trauma on pastors would be very helpful for the care of pastors.

²⁵⁹ Ps. 18:6.

²⁶⁰ Ps. 18:19.

Alternative means of financing the church—beyond the collecting of tithes and offerings—should be explored for under-resourced churches, so they can provide sabbatical for their pastors. The study of the family systems of church planters and pastors could add much needed data on their particular needs. How pastors and lay leaders work together for the health of the church and its pastor is a course of study that could prove fruitful. Various forms of church polity and their affects on collaboration should be a focus of this study.

Self-reporting issues exist for pastors. They would benefit from an agreed upon distress signal. A distress signal, also known as a distress call, is an internationally recognized means for obtaining help. A distress signal indicates that a person or group of people is threatened by a serious or imminent danger and requires immediate assistance. Asking for help, sending up flares, or making a distress call is difficult for pastors who can't trust their lay leaders, or believe that distress is stigmatized, and revealing it would be consequential. More study into self-reporting of pastors' needs can be done.

Appendix A: Establishing a Sabbatical Policy

Churches that do not have a sabbatical in place for full-time ministry staff can use the following guidance.

1. Identify the stakeholders. The pastor, lay leaders, and congregation all have a stake in the pastor's physical, emotional, and psychological health. The pastor's and the church's involvement in the community will determine the extent to which consideration might be given to the societal interests for the pastor to secure a sabbatical.
2. Enumerate the interests of each set of stakeholders. How will their interests be furthered as a church establishes a sabbatical policy for those in full-time ministry?
3. Define the power, formal and relational, that each stakeholder possesses. How will they exercise their power to promote their interests in establishing a sabbatical policy? At what point will formal power need to be exercised?
4. As stakeholders collaborate with shared power and shared interests, a sabbatical policy can begin to take shape.
 - a. Start by introducing the concept of sabbatical and how it is rooted in biblical history.
 - b. State the purpose of a pastoral sabbatical.
 - c. State which ministry positions are eligible for a sabbatical.
 - d. Identify the application process, making sure a detailed sabbatical plan is included, along with the timing of the application.
 - e. Include details regarding the length of the sabbatical, if the sabbatical may be divided or not, and timing sabbatical leave with other staff members' plans.
 - f. Clarify the financial agreement.
 - g. Clarify employee and employer commitments after the sabbatical.

Additional comments:

- Lay leaders and congregants should become champions for sabbaticals and promote the formation and exercise of a sabbatical policy.
- Lay leaders and congregants must commit to not disrupting the sabbatical.
- Other ministry staff and lay leaders must willingly step up to additional responsibilities in the pastor's absence.
- NOTE: pastorserve.org is a great resource for information on sabbatical policies and practices.

Appendix B: Sample Sabbatical Policy

Sabbatical Leave Policy* Rincon Mountain Presbyterian Church

Introduction

The concept of sabbatical is rooted in the biblical concept of “Sabbath” which God modeled (Genesis 2:1-4a) and commanded (Exodus 20:8-11). In Leviticus 25:1-7, the Lord says that after the sixth year the people were not supposed to sow the fields or harvest a crop. The land was allowed to rest, and therefore, so were the people.

A sabbatical provides rest from challenging labors and an outlet for built-up stress. Sabbatical leave is a time for renewal, reflection and restoration. We believe that our pastors and ministry staff should model God’s design for sabbath rest. We believe that a time of sabbatical is important both in the sharpening and renewal of the pastor and for the health and strength of the church. The pastor who uses the sabbatical well often returns with new enthusiasm and clarity of calling and vision. The sabbatical also provides an opportunity for the congregation to grow in their ability to function without the lead pastor and for other staff and lay leaders to improve their leadership skills.

Purpose

The sabbatical is for the pursuit of activities approved by the Session. The intent of a sabbatical is to further the ministry objectives of the church, to enhance the personal ministry of the staff member, and to provide for physical, spiritual and relational renewal and refreshment. (It is understood that not all three intents will necessarily be fulfilled equally.)

Eligibility

A sabbatical may be granted to full-time members of the ministry staff, whether they are ordained pastors or un-ordained ministry staff members.

Application

The Session will work together to determine a timeframe best suitable for the sabbatical. When the sabbatical involves a ministry staff member, the staff member will work out the sabbatical details with his or her supervisor. A detailed sabbatical plan will be presented to the Session at the time application for a sabbatical is made. Such a plan should be presented at least six months prior to the proposed sabbatical.

The sabbatical plan should include:

- a description of the desired sabbatical activities (see the Addendum below)
- a statement of how these activities will benefit the staff member and/ or the church
- the dates selected for the sabbatical
- if the church has funds set aside for sabbatical, a budget outlining sabbatical costs for things like: travel, classes, retreats, counseling etc.
- how the pastor's ministry will be carried out during the sabbatical.

Approval of a sabbatical plan is at the discretion of the lay leaders.

Timing

1. After six years of full-time service to the church, the pastor or ministry leader shall be granted a minimum three-month sabbatical. The lay leaders and the pastor may consent together to shorten the sabbatical to no less than three months if there is no Assistant or Associate Pastor to take over leadership duties. In the case that the sabbatical is shortened, the remaining months of sabbatical shall be taken the following year.
2. After an additional three years of service, the pastor may choose to take a sabbatical commensurate with the time in service. For example, the pastor may take an initial sabbatical of three months after six years of service and then may take another sabbatical of one month after three more years of service. Or he may take a second sabbatical of two months after serving an additional four years.
3. The months taken in sabbatical should be taken consecutively in order to maximize the possibility for refreshment or concentrated study. Exceptions can be made only with the consent of the lay leaders.
4. If possible, the sabbatical should be scheduled at a time that will minimize the disruptive effect on the normal operation of the church (i.e. summer may be preferable).
5. Unless approved by the lay leaders, no two staff members shall take a sabbatical within six months of each other. If staff member's sabbatical plans conflict, priority shall be given to the most senior staff member in terms of length of service.

Financial Agreement

The church shall continue to pay the pastor's regular salary and full benefits.

All costs of travel or other expenses incurred during the sabbatical shall be the responsibility of the pastor unless funds from the church have been designated for such uses.

Reports

Upon returning, the pastor will make a written or oral report to the church Session recapping how the time was spent and what was learned.

Employee and Church Agreement About Employment

The employee who chooses to take a sabbatical under this policy agrees to the following terms.

- Because the sabbatical is unlike an ordinary paid vacation in that its purpose is expressly for the future benefit of the employing church as well as for the present and future benefit of the employee, the employee agrees that as far as it depends on him or her, he or she will continue in his or her full-time service to the church for at least one year from the date of his or her return from the sabbatical.

The church agrees to the following terms.

- The church agrees that it will not in any way seek a replacement for an employee during his sabbatical.
- The church agrees that it will honor the leave of the employee and agrees not to contact him with church business except in case of emergency.

Addendum –Sabbatical Policy

Personal renewal might include time of both individual renewal of the spiritual life (e.g. retreat, time of solitude), and family renewal with a focus on the marriage relationship (if applicable).

Professional growth might include a topic or goal of interest that will give opportunity for growth and learning with some concentrated energy.

Here are some examples of sabbatical activities that have been found to be helpful:

1. Cross-cultural experiences. This may involve a short-term missions experience.
2. Marriage enrichment activities with a trained counselor.
3. Engaging in an extensive physical examination.
4. Studying a topic of interest. This may be an area of interest only to the individual, like taking an art class, learning to play an instrument or learning to parasail. It also may be something that will benefit the congregation, like learning about church history or an in-depth study of a book of the Bible. It may take the form of a seminary continuing education course, extensive reading, program planning, or writing for publication.
5. Times of extended solitude.
6. Visiting other churches and interacting with people in a similar role.
7. Visiting family members, mentors, or former colleagues.

8. Resting, relaxing, and exercising.

9. Keeping a journal.

This list is by no means considered to be exhaustive.

*Adapted from pastorserve.org/writing-a-sabbatical-policy

Appendix C: Our Distress Story

I established the practice at Rincon Mountain of choosing a theme verse for the year for our church body to memorize and understand well. I typically choose this verse from the first passage that I preach at the beginning of the year.

We've had theme verses like 2 Corinthians 4:5, 6

[5] For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. [6] For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. 2 Corinthians 4:5–6

And Isaiah 42:3

[3] a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.

When I preached through Galatians our verse was Galatians 4:4, 5

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

In January of 2020, I was preaching through the Gospel of Mark and we were in Mark 6 on the first Sunday. The passage was on Jesus feeding the 5000 but the verses leading up to the miracle included Mark 6:31a:

And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.”

This became our theme verse for the year. No one knew what desolate places 2020 would hold for many pastors and ministry leaders.

Prior to 2020, I thought I was doing everything right to avoid burnout, compassion fatigue, and depression. I’d had two three-month sabbatical leaves, I took my full two weeks of study leave each year, I honored my day off—most of the time, I take naps. Naps are the best. I met with a cohort group a number of times in recent years. But God has purposes in desolate places and he had much for me to learn in those difficult years.

I began to feel burnt out. I was developing compassion fatigue at a quick pace, and I was clinically depressed.

On Labor Day weekend when Shelley and I were attending a family event outside Austin, TX, I had an emotional break. I was not thinking rationally. I had some suicidal ideation. All the political tension, racial unrest and COVID issues kept coming up in every conversation and I couldn’t escape it. I felt overwhelmed and I was ready to escape.

My wife, Shelley, commented. “I watched Phil hit rock bottom. He was in a horribly desolate place. This was a different level than discouraging seasons in ministry. We were sitting in our car in the middle of a dark, rainstorm. It was a picture of what was happening in the car. Pounding, washing away of ministry, calling, life. In the midst of

this onslaught, I had the thought, ‘This is not an ending, it is a beginning.’ I believe this was the Holy Spirit, keeping me grounded as Phil went into a spin. Later, the Spirit would tell us more, but it was what I needed to keep me from falling apart. I had no one to talk to in that family gathering. I had to hold the turmoil of him leaving. I challenged him to have a destination in Austin because knew what a risk it was for him to drive off in that rainstorm.”

My plan was to drive through that storm, get a hotel room in Austin, wait out the weekend, and come back and pick her up and drive home to Tucson. But I wasn’t coming back to the ministry. I was out. No mas!

Then we saw a light in the storm. My best friend from seminary lived in Austin. He was teaching at a Christian school and had a private counseling practice on the side. I called Danny and he was available that afternoon. He and I met for over three hours and he talked me off the ledge.

I felt isolated and inadequate along with a lot of other emotions. The first thing Danny did was validate what I was feeling. The emotions and feelings we feel when we go through trauma are real and legit. And, he told me that if God was calling me to something else, it would be okay for me to leave my church and to leave ministry. The key phrase there being, “if God was calling me to something else.”

Shelley has reminded me of that often. I have faithfully fulfilled what God has called me to do but I can’t just run away when it gets tough or when I don’t like what God is calling me to do. God calls us to himself. He calls us to what he has purposed for

us to do. I couldn't just run, as much as I wanted to. God had to be calling me to something else.

The second thing Danny did after he validated what I was feeling was to remind me that I could not leave Shelley out of this, no way, no how. She needed to know everything going on with me, how I was coping, or not, and what I was thinking. She is my rock.

So, there I sat. In my friend's office, crying. Broken. At one of the lowest points in my life.

I have a Master's degree in Marriage and Family Therapy and an MDiv. I've done thousands of hours of counseling couples and individuals and all the sudden I found that I was the guy needing help. I was not supposed to be the guy sitting across from the counselor. I was the counselor; not that guy.

But Shelley knew that guy needed a guy. She shared, "I watched as Phil hit rock bottom in that desolate place; this gifted man felt useless as a pastor. He has always been a good mentor to pastors, and yet he felt he had run his ministry course. I felt helpless to walk beside him and be useful. He was not on the ledge, but his tank was empty and he was still talking exit, not direction. It is life draining for pastor's wife to watch her husband go through this sort of crisis. It is even harder for her to find safe places to find life giving care.

"There is a Facebook group for PCA pastor's wives. It was obvious that other pastors and their wives were being attacked the same way we were. During this time,

wives reported weekly, ‘We’re leaving. We’re not just leaving this church, but ministry altogether. We don’t know what we will be doing.’ When Phil hit a low point, it seemed we were heading in the same direction.

“Even though I was convinced God was doing something new in him, and he was using a very dark valley to get there, I still had no idea where we would be when we came out of this place. It was hard for some people to understand what Phil needed. I was afraid to leave him alone as I went to work each day. We were in crisis and I would spend my day pouring out to my students and coworkers. I was emotionally empty, scared, and helpless. I could not say the right thing, do the right thing, come along side. I challenged Phil to contact our friend Ron and Romans 12 Ministries.²⁶¹ He was convinced he was done and that he shouldn’t pursue anything to stay in ministry. He was looking to gently retire without too much damage to the church. God had other plans.”

So, I met with Ron. I had met with him when he began the ministry to pastors so he could pick my brain about what I did to stay fresh and alive in the ministry—which, with a brain like mine, didn’t take very long. We sat out on the patio of a local coffee shop and I started pouring my heart out to this brother. The entire meeting was encouraging and could be summed up in one comment this brother made:

“I’m going to fight for you!”

²⁶¹ “Ministry & Pastoral Services Tucson,” Romans 12 Ministries, accessed March 6, 2025, <https://www.romans12ministries.org/>.

I cannot tell you how much I needed to hear those words and how much they meant to me then and now. Romans 12 has been fighting for me. Here's how they fought for me: they intentionally designed to take me from isolation by providing connection and to help uproot those feelings of inadequacy and bring affirmation of my giftings.

Here's how they fought for me:

- They enabled me to take monthly personal retreats,
- I met for 8 times with a trained counselor who insisted that he meet with me and Shelley before he terminated the counseling. Great idea. Make sure I'm thinking right again.
- They found me a pastor. We met every week for several months. We shared laughs and tears as he taught me about the gift of pain – that God uses pain to bring about the growth and dependence upon him that we need. For the last 20 years I have not had a mentor or pastor. Now I do.
- The Session at our church formed a Pastoral Care Team that met regularly with me. They've also met with Shelley to determine what her needs are. The Session also put money in the budget for pastoral care.
- Shelley met with the women's director at Romans 12 ministries and attended a few women's events where she felt the love and support of other pastors' wives.

Though I was not due for a sabbatical at the time, the Session of our church gave us a mini-sabbatical of one month to rest and recover. This time afforded Shelley and I to the opportunity to attend an 8-day intensive marriage retreat for pastors and their wives in Marble, CO. The retreat ran Wednesday through Friday with two 90-minute sessions each day. We had Saturday and Sunday off and then met again with the therapist twice a day on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. And then, because we were doing so well, the therapist and his wife met with us for a couple of extra sessions to work some things out.

On a side note, the retreat center had a couple of displays in the common area that you might find in a hotel lobby with interesting things to do in the area. On the table lay

some glossy cards advertising the retreat center. Up in the left-hand corner of the promotional card was this verse:

“Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.” Mark 6:31a

One of the lasting images that my therapist gave me at Marble Retreat was the image of the “4th quarter”. In a ball game, the 4th quarter is the most important quarter. You’ve got to execute, you must stick to the game plan. My therapist affirmed that all that stuff that I had experienced in 26 years of ministry—and particularly the previous 18 months—was preparation for the 4th quarter. God has more ministry left for me and I am excited and passionate for what is coming in the 4th quarter.

I read three very different books by three very different authors in 2020. One was the 2019 Gospel Coalition book of the year by Harold Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls*. The second was *Lead* by Paul David Tripp and the third was *Every Pastor Needs a Pastor* by Louis McBurney. All three of these books said something that I had not considered previously. Every pastor needs a pastor. Who is pastoring you?

Shelley had a few take-aways from our time at the retreat.

1. Like the marble found all around Marble, CO, God is at work to shape us as an artist shapes a piece of marble. Consider the pleased look on the face of God as he chisels and makes us more like His son. He already sees the image, he is just removing the impurities.
2. We keep going better with daily bread. It doesn’t have to be life changing, teachable/preachable nuggets. Just food for the day. When we talk about that nugget for

the day, I see what God is doing in his day and he sees what God is doing in mine. Phil and I read the same passage and many days, the Holy Spirit applies the Word differently.

3. Phil and I need relationship with each other.

Shelley observed, “At the retreat, I watched Phil move from hopeless and useless to restored, to refreshed, to renewal of passion for God’s Kingdom work. Phil isn’t just back in the pulpit but he has hope for that day and God’s purpose for him. He’s restored. The Lord revealed to us the purpose he has for us in the final and most important quarter of ministry. He is confident in God’s sustained work in his life and ministry. He is passionate about Kingdom Work, and using the many gifts he has been given for God’s purpose.

“Phil is not crisis free. We are still going through times that feel like walking through sludge in order to love the flock and days when I don’t know how Phil will be in the pulpit on Sunday. The Holy Spirit shows Himself, Jesus advocates. I have seen that it is not Phil and me that sustain His calling. It is always God. I have found great rest, yes actual rest in this. When he is low, I pray and release. This past season taught me to open my hand with Phil. There have been many seasons where I have watched Phil get bit by the sheep. The Holy Spirit has always given me the ability to love specific people in those situations. He sustains my call too, as a pastor’s wife, as a daughter of the King using my gifts.

“Caring for the shepherd is caring for the flock. If you defeat, isolate, and discourage the pastor, the church suffers. If you help pastors stay healthy, and vibrant, the Kingdom work goes on. The best help is to focus on the work the Lord carries and the

way He sustains His people and His work. We went to a desolate place but we didn't go alone. The Lord met us there and revealed to us the purpose he has for us in the final and most important quarter of ministry. We need His equipping, Word, and people to carry it out.”

Nothing so identifies anyone as a disciple of Jesus as our love for one another, and that duty lies especially heavy upon pastors. We’ve all had to try to love people who are terribly difficult. A pastor I know emailed some friends about a long-simmering explosion in his church. He wrote, “The meeting last night went badly by most measurements.” Then this, “I trust that God is working through it anyway.” There it is. What pastor doesn’t understand that?

Even when our people are great, it takes faith to love them well, to depend on God to superintend our schedules and conversations. Our days are often interrupted by the nudges and prompts of God. But our people see that we were there when they needed us or remember our timely call. Our faith is tested along with theirs. Sometimes we suffer and wait with them, bewildered, in the ashes.

If you’re a pastor in distress and considering leaving ministry, consider these things first.

- God has gifted you for ministry through the ministry of the church as you grew in the gospel.
- God has trained you for ministry through informal ministry opportunities and through formal seminary education.

- God has equipped you for ministry through the men and women God has placed along the path in your ministry that have made you grow.
- Very few, if any, of you should leave the ministry. You have ministry left that God wants you to do.

Make sure your church has a sabbatical policy and get ready to use it!

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