

I'm finally taking my first sabbatical from ministry

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Here in Cambridge, England, I pray in the mornings, read St. Paul, walk in the afternoons—sometimes through soft English rains—and sip hot tea with cream. One Friday, while King's College graduates were processing in their fur-lined academic hoods, I went so far as to eat a sausage roll and Chelsea bun.

For the first time in my ministry, I am on sabbatical. I have ended up at Wesley House on Jesus Lane, far away from the church in North Carolina where I serve as senior pastor.

Back home there is a heat wave and the helter-skelter of summer ministry—VBS, music camp, fall planning—along with the ongoing surgeries, pastoral cares, and “summer slump” budget worries.

Here in this English Methodist seminary, there are conversations about new bishop appointments in the United Methodist church back home. But for now I am apart from all of that. By arrangement with the Anglican seminary across the street, I pray with priests. I have the library to myself. I am rereading Philipians and Philemon. I'm thankful to be here.

I'm also thankful for the *United Methodist Book of Discipline*. Back home that book has become a flashpoint, with conferences and bishops and clergy debating, dissenting from, and defending certain paragraphs. But I'm grateful for paragraphs 351.1, 2, 3, which grant tired pastors the time needed for refreshment and renewal.

Whoever crafted those passages must have known that many United Methodist preachers proclaim Paul but practice Pelagius. So often we go about our duties as if they will save us. Pastors are prone to what Brené Brown calls cultural idolatry: “exhaustion as a status symbol and performance as self-worth.

For most pastors sabbath is more doctrine than practice, more interpretive crux than existential reality. Some of us are afraid to take time off or away, afraid that people

will not be able to function without us—or that they will. When I first considered taking a sabbatical, I felt guilty at the thought of an extended break from my work-a-day duties. I was uneasy about continuing to draw my regular salary while I “wasn’t working.” (I thought about Scrooge’s rant to Bob Cratchit on Christmas Eve.)

But then I remembered how Jesus withdrew from the crowds to pray, and then returned to them ready to heal, feed, and preach. I recalled, too, how Thomas Merton said that “happiness is not a matter of intensity but of balance, order, rhythm, and harmony.” This is the point and the hope of my sabbatical—that when I return I’ll have a non-anxious and balanced view of events and challenges, from above the trenches.

At home I’m a steward of the gospel and its claims, the church and its missions, the world and its needs, my congregation and its administrative demands, the life stories of members in the midst of their journeys, and myself and my family. Tending all of these stories can frazzle and fray pastors, especially if they don’t step back now and then.

Will Willimon has said that pastors can become quivering masses of availability. If a pastor’s personal lamp is burning low, she has no light to offer the church or the world or others.

A few months ago I realized that my lamp was out of oil. I felt an urgent pull to become unavailable, to calm and re-center my heart for a while: to refocus my mind and soul.

In order to be a fresh channel of God’s blessing and a sign of God’s presence, I needed renewal, a replenishment of my spirit with time spent in the presence of God. A disciplined time away has brought me back to life. Hopefully, after reclaiming who I am by remembering who God is and how God has claimed me, I am deepening my love for God and being made new for my work and life.