



SABBATICAL BEST PRACTICES & TIPS

Pastors often reach out to us with questions about taking a sabbatical—an extended period of time away from normal ministerial responsibilities granted for spiritual renewal. Sabbaticals are not vacations but rather carefully planned periods of time devoted to rest, reflection and renewal.

If you're planning a sabbatical, let us offer these tips, compiled from the wisdom of our consultants at The Unstuck Group, as well as Lance Witt at Replenish Ministries and some of the churches we've served. We know every church has its own policies, so we aimed to keep these high-level enough to be useful in different contexts.

- 1 **Make the objective of your sabbatical clear for yourself, your board and the people you lead.** The goal is *rest, reflection and renewal*.
- 2 **A good sabbatical takes planning and preparation (even financially).** Don't wing it. Start preparing for it at least six months before you will take it. Chat with your board about whether or not they will provide any financial resources to help with your sabbatical. Think about how you will spend your time: spiritual time, recreational time and family time.
- 3 **You will not get the most out of this experience if you enter it "fried" or hating life or ministry.** You don't want to spend the first half of your sabbatical feeling like a zombie, just trying to recover. Aim to be in a healthy rhythm of working from rest before you get to sabbatical, rather than working toward it as an escape. If you're not living with healthy rhythms now, consider this your pre-work.
- 4 **Make one of your goals to relieve *obligation* and *pressure*.** Reflect on the areas of your life where these things have accumulated, and aim to set them aside for this designated period so that you can breathe deeply—physically, emotionally and spiritually.
- 5 **Do not over-schedule your sabbatical.** You're probably more tired than you realize. Front-load your sabbatical with physical rest, sleep and freedom to drift. You can plan more structure in the second half of the sabbatical.

- 6 **Make a plan for your technology.** What are you going to do about email? What are you going to do about people contacting you? Some people get a “burner phone” and only share the number with family. Some people give up their smartphone altogether or use a tool like the Brick App Blocker. Consider all the channels by which your usual work captures your attention.
- 7 **Do something for yourself.** What is something you have always wanted to do that would be a major “bucket-filler” for you? For example, we know of a pastor who loved motorcycles and decided to take a solo ride from Calgary, Canada to Los Angeles.
- 8 **Do something unique with your spouse and kids.** You will only have a few moments like this in your life when you have this much unscheduled time. How can you leverage it to make a memory that will last a lifetime?
- 9 **Make an intentional plan for re-entry.** In space exploration, the most dangerous part of the journey is re-entry. The same can be true of re-entry after sabbatical. As you near the end of your sabbatical, do a personal retreat for one to two days and just listen to God. You could also engage a spiritual director to help you discern more clearly. What has He said to you? What should you pay attention to now moving back into normal life?

Allow yourself to re-enter slowly. Your first week back to work should be slow and measured. You don’t want your soul to feel “whiplash” as you come back into the world of ministry.

This is a great moment to push the reset button on your role. What changes do you need to make? What do you need to give up? What does your ideal week look like? Also, when it comes to re-entry, you need to manage expectations. Some people will think that during your sabbatical you have gone to the mountain to be with God, and now you will come back with a holy glow, making your preaching more powerful than ever. Make a plan to communicate what it was really like and how God met you where you were.

TIMING AND COMMUNICATION



What does a healthy sabbatical rhythm look like? Consider one about every seven years for senior church leaders. Don’t call two or three weeks away a sabbatical. Shoot for a period of six weeks up to three months to really create the right conditions to decompress, disconnect, be present with God and fill yourself back up.



How should you talk about your sabbatical? A while back, we were impressed by an email James Griffin, lead pastor of Crosspoint City Church in Cartersville, Georgia, sent to his congregation, explaining why he was taking a sabbatical. Depending on your role on the team, you may want to consider taking a similar approach for communicating with the congregation about what sabbatical really means, how it contributes to the health of your church and how to be praying for their pastors. He gave us permission to share the exact email in this blog post:

[The Right Way to Talk About Your Sabbatical.](#)

Here are a few more ideas for communicating about your sabbatical:

- Put something on the website that explains the “why,” and prepare a short FAQ sheet.
- Have another person in leadership (like an elder) stand up on a Sunday and talk about why they are giving this pastor/staff member a sabbatical, making sure they express that they are 100% in agreement about providing this.
- If you are the lead pastor, consider doing a couple of short videos that could be shared at a weekend service or two while you are on sabbatical.

MORE RESOURCES

[Establishing Ministry Healthy Rhythms & Boundaries with Lance Witt – Episode 248](#)
The Unstuck Church Podcast

[The Sabbatical Journey: A field guide to prepare for, experience and reorient from a life-changing sabbatical](#)
by Alan Briggs

[Replenish: Leading from a Healthy Soul](#)
by Lance Witt



ABOUT THE UNSTUCK GROUP

The Unstuck Group helps pastors grow healthy churches by guiding them through experiences to align vision, strategy, team and action. Our core services include ministry health assessments, strategic planning, staffing and structure reviews and multisite consulting. Learn more by visiting theunstuckgroup.com.



ABOUT REPLENISH MINISTRIES

Lance Witt has been leading churches and organizations for 40+ years. He was the lead pastor for three different churches before spending seven years as an executive and teaching pastor at Saddleback Church. In 2007, Lance launched Replenish, a ministry focused on two key priorities: helping individuals live and lead from a healthy soul and helping teams and organizations become healthy and high performing. In the years since, he has encouraged challenged and equipped thousands of leaders and teams through speaking, coaching, writing and the One Life Process that he created. Learn more at replenish.net.