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Making Mission Possible

ARROW ARTICLES

TAKING A SABBATICAL

ARROW ARTICLE 12

For those who are able to take a sabbatical it is a wonderful opportunity to recharge the batteries and do some wider stock-taking. I am very aware that many leaders are in roles where they aren't offered sabbatical leave, but even in those roles there may be creative ways to do something similar (in an earlier incarnation when I had few 'responsibilities' I took four months leave between jobs, and a friend of mine working in business has recently been granted a six week period of extended leave).

The following are some of the things I have learnt in the process of taking three sabbaticals.

PLAN AHEAD

If you are thinking of taking a sabbatical recognise they can take up to two years to plan; two years to line up the various people who you need to make it happen (both those in authority over you, and those you work with) – so don't delay. Identify an ideal time of the year for you (it will vary, but a good rule of thumb is to try and take it over at least one of your 'busy' periods), get the dates in the diary, and start approaching the people you need to approach.

IF YOU ARE THINKING OF TAKING A SABBATICAL RECOGNISE THEY CAN TAKE UP TO TWO YEARS TO PLAN

In this period of planning:

- Don't be discouraged by negative or graceless comments: 'Oh, it is alright for some.' Do be humble and sensitive about how you communicate it.
- Read everything you can on how to prepare for a sabbatical. There is lots of good material around. Some denominations have an officer responsible for sabbatical leave.
- Find someone to mentor or guide you through the process of going on sabbatical, from early thinking to taking it and then reflecting on it, someone who knows how to guide people through a sabbatical. I have had invaluable advice that has saved me from making some major mistakes.
- Prepare for it very thoroughly – practically, emotionally, and spiritually. You don't want to enter your sabbatical clueless about how to approach it. You will waste a lot of time. Identify a rhythm for your sabbatical that will serve you well.

BE CLEAR ABOUT WHAT YOU ARE TAKING

There is a difference between sabbatical and study leave. I know there are some technical reasons why, for example, Anglican dioceses tend to use study leave rather than sabbatical to describe them, but there is a difference. Study leave generally involves a 'project' of some sort, a focus to the study that will lead to something at the end of it. Whilst a really good thing, and I think we ought to have study leave on a far more regular basis, sabbatical is not the same.

The focus of a sabbatical is rest, renewal and recreation. The whole point is that there isn't necessarily a great 'project' to do, but rather a great deal of space and non-pressured time to 'be'. Believe me, this is far more scary than a study break. It isn't that there aren't things that will be done on a sabbatical, but rather that there is an absence of pressure and the need to do 'something'.

BE PRAYERFUL

Try to distil the grace you are seeking from God during your sabbatical into a single sentence prayer. For example, on my first sabbatical it was 'Lord, renew me in my relationship with you.' Then pray that prayer and when others ask what they can pray for you, offer what you have discerned.

You can create a prayer card with that 'grace' and with other key things on it, for example a retreat you are going on, and give it to people who ask what you are doing for your sabbatical.

BE PRACTICAL

Agree with colleagues terms of contact before you start. There is no right or wrong answer to this, but be very clear under what circumstances they are to break your sabbatical. They should be very few in number.

Sort what is going to happen to emails, post, voicemail before you leave. The last thing you want is to return to a ridiculous mountain of emails and post. I put an automatic reply on my emails explaining I am on sabbatical, that all emails will be automatically deleted, and that if their email is urgent please resend to N. It is not good to continue to do work emails during a sabbatical, yet I am amazed how many times I have emailed people not knowing they were on sabbatical, only to receive a reply from them saying that 'they are on sabbatical but in response to my email....' Some people set up a separate email account just for the period of their sabbatical and are careful about whom they give the address to.

I leave a message on voicemail explaining the same. And with post (not much these days) I ask a colleague to open it and sort it into three piles.

- Pile 1 is basically stuff I don't need to see. Straight in the rubbish bin.
- Pile 2 is stuff that they think I might be interested in, but can pick up at anytime.
- Pile 3 is the stuff that I need to give attention to as soon as I return.

RECOGNISE THE 'FLOW' OF A SABBATICAL

If at all possible, really do stop on the day your sabbatical starts. Try not to carry things over from work into the first week as all too often that then sets a pattern it is harder to stop. The first two weeks you will be really tired. Most of us end up working really hard in the final weeks leading up to the start of the sabbatical. So don't plan anything in those first two weeks. Slow down, chill, relax, do some fun things and sleep lots.

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Try to work out a rhythm for the day. The idea is that the rhythm will 'carry' you and sustain you through the sabbatical. Ideally the rhythm of the day will include prayer, rest, relaxation, exercise and some element of reflection. It shouldn't be demanding but gentle. It may be helpful to follow this rhythm Monday to Friday and then do something different over the weekend. On an early sabbatical my rhythm was:

	Arise later that I normally do.
8.30	Take the kids to school and then go to a friend's house where they had kindly leant me a room for the sabbatical.
9.10	Prayer, Bible reading, journaling.
10.00	Reading, reflecting, thinking.
12.00	Exercise, lunch and snooze.
2.00	Whatever took my fancy!
3.30	Pick up kids and be around for the rest of the day/ do some fun things.

Obviously the rhythm will depend on your life situation and stage of life, but having one is generally a helpful way of moving through the sabbatical.

A time of retreat is normally a good thing to do on a sabbatical (perhaps week two or maybe even better week three), as is a really special holiday if at all possible. Build them in at appropriate points. Normally it takes around four to eight weeks to realise how tired you are. Many speak of feeling a little depressed or down in the early parts. This is normal as you stop, and your body begins to recover from what is often years of overwork. For that reason it may be best to plan the holiday element for the latter part of the sabbatical when you are at your best and can most enjoy it.

Be sure to work out good patterns of exercise (ideally five to six times a week for at least 30 minutes, a simple walk is sufficient), of eating and drinking (all the normal stuff about your seven a day) and of sleeping (the hours before midnight really do count more than the ones after).

You may like to identify a hobby or area of interest that is not related to work that you would like to take up or reconnect with. For me it was photography. I bought myself a second-hand camera and learnt how to take some half decent photos. I had the space to give some time to this that simply wasn't available in normal life. Yet, it was so energising it has now become a part of normal life. What might the equivalent be for you?

Just as it takes time to get into a sabbatical, it is also helpful to take time to get out of it, otherwise it can be a fairly daunting experience of starting back on day one. One way of doing this it to meet with your mentor or spiritual director about 10 days before the end of the sabbatical to help process what has happened and what to do with what has happened. This may be combined with two or three days retreat to reflect on the sabbatical. Then four or five days before I start back I gently plan for my re-entry. I ask for the pile three letters to be delivered to my home and sort them out. I look at my diary and plan for any meetings or events coming up in that first week. I re-engage my prayer life for my work. This only takes one or two hours a day, so it isn't returning to a full day, but just

gently cranking back up. All this means that when I officially start back I am ready and I don't immediately feel lost in a sea of activity.

SOME TOP TIPS

I asked some friends for their top tips on sabbaticals:

- Leave enough space for pleasant detours or surprising turns.
- Eliminate deadlines, the need to do things.
- A specific focus for study or reflection can be helpful, but should not feel like work.
- If you are married/have children, consult with your family and build in special time for each of them.
- Change a few small things. For example, the time you get up in the morning, the shape of your journal (even the pen you use), your pattern of exercise, domestic duties.
- Try to pray in a different way to your normal pattern.
- Take time to identify possible sources of funding and apply far enough ahead.

TAKE IT

And lastly, if you are in the privileged position to have a sabbatical – take one. There is something in the seven year cycle that is immensely powerful, and the opportunity to place ourselves in the hands of Almighty God for three months in a way which just isn't possible in our normal roles is not to be missed. It is scary, but oh so worthwhile.

FOR FURTHER READING

- http://www.buildingchurchleaders.com/, Taking a Sabbatical, a series of articles and resources on sabbaticals.
- Diocese of Portsmouth, Extended Ministerial Development Leave (although this contains elements of study leave).
- Google Best Practices for a Sabbatical (Wheat Ridge Ministries), and Sabbath Keeping and Sabbatical Taking (Eastern North Dakota Synod Resource Center).

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