

SABBATICAL GUIDE

By Bill Gaultiere | Soul Shepherding, Inc.

FAQ

Like the pastors, leaders, and ministry couples we've coached on Sabbatical, you probably have some questions. Let's consider the typical questions we get asked and we'll offer Soul Shepherding's approach to each one. Our Sabbatical Guide, coaching tools, and coaching process with Spiritual Directors will address these issues and more in depth.

1. How long should my Sabbatical last?

For younger pastors who have served in their church for seven years we recommend four to eight week Sabbaticals. After each additional five to seven years of service we recommend three or four month Sabbaticals.

2. What if I'm too busy or feel it's too hard to take a Sabbatical?

Usually it's very difficult for pastors to get away for a Sabbatical — even if they can get approval from their board or supervisor. Taking a first Sabbatical is particularly stressful and brings up resistances. There is no perfect time to go on Sabbatical and there will always be compelling reasons not to go. The best way to do a Sabbatical is to start praying and planning for it one year ahead. Our coaching process will help you discern from the Lord what you need for your Sabbatical and then guide you step-by-step in implementing it.

3. What do I do on Sabbatical? Where do I go?

Often what's behind this question is a fear of being bored or restless. Many pastors' lives are so full of activity, noise, and responsibility that to have open space to rest evokes anxiety. To care for your soul and relationships on Sabbatical it's important that you not busy yourself with activity, entertainment, or projects. Probably you'll want to combine a mix of activities and locations like retreat centers, vacation time (especially for your family), being hosted in the home of family or friends (who can help watch your children), and staying in your own home to take day trips to parks and other quiet venues

4. What soul care practices do you offer for my Sabbatical?

Soul Shepherding's resources for Sabbatical cultivate intimacy with Jesus and spiritual renewal through praying Scripture, journaling, and soul talk.

- *Your Best Life in Jesus' Easy Yoke* features inspiring Bible studies on Jesus, self-assessments on issues related to anxiety, psychological insights to de-stress, and a variety of practical soul care practices.
- *Lectio Divina Guides* includes 70 one-page Scripture meditations with focus questions for listening to the Word, your emotions, and the Spirit of Jesus' invitation for you today. The topical index of Scriptures makes it easy to pick meditations that fit your needs on Sabbatical.
- *Ignatian Meditation Guides* includes 50 one-page Scripture meditations go through the life of Jesus and guide you in using your imagination and senses to foster appreciation of God's grace in your life.
- *Breath Prayer Guides* includes 40 one-page Scripture meditations that show you how to use different breathing rhythms to contemplate beloved Bible verses.
- *Unforsaken: With Jesus on the Stations of the Cross* fosters a fresh experience of Jesus' love for you through Gospel readings, meditations, and prayers related to Jesus' cross. You can do this while physically walking the Stations of the Cross at a retreat center or you can use the artist's pictures in the booklet to do a virtual prayer walk. The whole experience takes about one hour.

5. What books are good to read on Sabbatical?

We recommend you not read books on church growth, leadership, or theological study, but instead focus on personal soul care, spiritual formation in Christ, and other reading you enjoy. To profit spiritually, seek to read in an unhurried way, reflecting on your feelings, praying, and sharing with a friend. We've put together a list of books that we recommend, including a number of classics of devotion to Christ, for your personal growth: [*Sabbatical Books*](#).

6. What if there's a church emergency while I'm away?

You should anticipate that while you're gone there will be urgent situations like pastoral care needs, funerals, and important leadership decisions. Prior to your Sabbatical one of the steps

we coach you in is to designate and train a pastor or elder who will act in your place while you're gone. Another step in the process is helping your elders, staff, and church to understand and support your personal boundaries during your Sabbatical season of rest and renewal.

7. What if people at church are afraid I will leave the church after my Sabbatical?

People fear this because sometimes a pastor's Sabbatical does facilitate a transition. A good first response is to invite people to share their feelings and offer empathy. This will help you understand their concerns and it will guide you in what to share personally. If you still feel called and happy to pastor at your church then you tell people that and share your hopes for your Sabbatical. If it's true that you would like to serve at a different church or change your career then you need to be careful not to make promises that aren't true and yet not to say something that hurts the church or you. In this case it's best to focus on your Sabbatical meeting your needs for rest, family time, soul care, and listening to God's direction. Also you can always ask people to pray for the church and you while you're on Sabbatical

8. What if my spouse isn't supportive of me taking a Sabbatical?

Ministry spouses who are tired from their work, caring for children, or supporting your ministry may resist your Sabbatical. Or they may want to fill your free time with house projects or caring for children to give them a break. Your Sabbatical may surface your spouse's hidden stress, resentment, or hurt in the marriage. If possible give some time in your Sabbatical for marriage renewal or counseling, retreat or refreshment days for your spouse, and spiritual direction or counseling for your spouse.

9. How can I do a Sabbatical with young children at home?

For pastors with children at home special family experiences are usually an important aspect of the Sabbatical. At the same time, active parenting is not restful and renewing!

10. Is it okay to do house projects on Sabbatical?

As useful and good as it may be, we recommend you not engage large projects in your home like remodeling, cleaning out your garage, or landscape renovation. Being productive or getting consumed with a project will work against experiencing Sabbath rest, worshiping God, and focusing on inner soul work.

11. Is it okay to engage ministry opportunities outside my church on Sabbatical (like speaking or writing)?

Ministry is important and it may be in your personal interests to serve outside of your normal church role, but it is contrary to practicing Sabbath rest on your Sabbatical. When you're productive, appreciated for your ministry, or challenged to accomplish something it recruits adrenaline and covers your underlying emotional needs. On Sabbatical it's important to rest and to persevere with that even if you get bored or antsy so that your deeper emotions, hurts, longings, and needs will surface for you to pray through and bring to your Spiritual Director, Soul Friend, or Counselor.

12. What do I tell people in our church who work hard and don't understand why the church would give a pastor a "long paid vacation"?

First, it's important to listen. Don't be defensive or avoidant, rather ask questions to understand and show empathy for their emotions. Then clarify the purpose of your Sabbatical and emphasize how it can strengthen your leadership and ministry at the church.

13. Where do I go to church during my Sabbatical?

An important aspect of your Sabbatical is stepping out of your pastor role to rediscover your identity simply as a Christ-follower, especially in the context of your family. At your church and with people from your church there are few if any people who can truly set aside their expectations of you as their pastor and simply be your safe friend. The best place to attend church is where you won't be recognized or to participate online. Even in that case you need to be careful not to go into a work mode of learning things to improve your church. You also want to avoid the pitfall of comparison. Some Sundays you want to do a simple family church service or take a personal retreat day.

14. What do I tell people who ask why I won't be in our church?

You could say something like, "It sounds like maybe you'll miss me and I appreciate that. Tell me more how you feel about this." After you empathize, share some things you enjoy about the church that you will miss. Then remind them that your Sabbatical is a time for you to set

aside your pastor role to rest, pray, and care for your family so that you can pastor with renewed energy.

15. What do I do if my spouse and/or children want to go to our church during my Sabbatical?

This is a difficult situation. On one hand, your spouse and children may feel it's important to keep continuity with their friendships and spiritual growth at the church. On the other hand, their connections with church people and activities would likely tempt you to go into your pastor role, at least in your thoughts and emotions. It's important to find a way to meet the spiritual needs of your family members and for you to have boundaries to protect your Sabbatical. You'll want to have family conversations to work this out. It will help if you can schedule blocks of time away from home for personal retreat, marriage refreshment, and family vacation. If when you're at home during your Sabbatical and your children are participating in church services or activities it's probably best if your spouse or a friend can handle the driving and communications.

16. What if I see people in my church in the store?

When you encounter people from your church in the community they will probably be happy to see you and relate with you as they normally would. They may even forget you're on Sabbatical. It's best to be friendly, offer some words of empathy or encouragement, and then gently set a boundary to end the conversation. Other people will want to know how your Sabbatical is going for you and how they can pray for you. You'll want to be prepared to share briefly how you've been blessed, what you're learning, or a general prayer request.

17. What do I do about my email, phone and text messages, and social media?

We recommend that during your Sabbatical you fast from all communications that put you into your ministry role or church engagement. In the timeline we suggest you explain this to your church and ministry contacts one or two months beforehand. During your Sabbatical you can set an auto reply, forward your messages, and/or literally have someone carry your phone. You may want to rent a separate phone and give your family, close friends, and key ministry contact this phone number.