

Enews for 7/19/23

Just by Chance

We are now in the height of summer and as I call around to check on pastors, I am glad to see that we're having to set lunch dates a few weeks out because they'll be on vacation. I'm also glad to look at my calendar and see a few preaching engagements to cover for pastors while they are away. God established cycles of work and rest into the fabric of the cosmos itself by resting on the seventh day of creation (Genesis 2:1-3) and writing the Sabbath into the boundaries of blessedness given to Israel at Sinai (Exodus 20:8-11 & Deuteronomy 5:12-15). In the Person of Jesus, God demonstrated the importance of this cycle of work and rest by regularly withdrawing from ministry to refocus his vision (Matthew 4:1ff, Mark 6:30ff, Luke 6:12, John 6:15ff, etc.).

The truth is that pastors are often the worst examples for embodying this cycle of rest and rejuvenation. By design they work on Sundays and often their day off during the week is interrupted by a funeral, a visit to the hospital, lunch with that church member for whom that is the only day that works, sermon preparation because the work of the church pushed that to the backburner the rest of the week, and the temptation to just take a peek at the email...

Most pastors I know are also pretty bad about actually taking their time off whether that is vacation or continuing education leave (I've been there; when reached the end of my last pastorate I had eight weeks of accumulated leave that I'd not used over the years!). The truth is, stressed out pastors are not good for congregations. They will be less creative, have less energy, and over time they will burnout and either seek the geographic cure (the idea that things will be better somewhere else) or leave ministry entirely. Stressed out pastors are not good for congregations for part of the call of pastors is to model and teach a life of discipleship and Sabbath observance is an essential part of that life! So, here are a few tips for congregations to strengthen themselves by giving their pastors a break:

ASK your pastor when his or her day off is. Respect that boundary and encourage others to do the same (including your pastor who is probably the one who violates it the most!).

ASK yourself if your pastor is over-functioning. In other words, is your pastor doing things that aren't part of the job description of a pastor? Is your pastor repairing the furnace? Vacuuming the floors? Folding the bulletins? Arranging the chairs for the fellowship meal? Changing the lightbulbs? Imagine how your pastor's time can be freed up for the kind of work that only the pastor can do or for Sabbath rest if these are more appropriately delegated to someone else. Then work with the session to make that happen!

ASK your pastor what his or her plans are for vacation and continuing education this year. Note that the minimum terms of call for full time pastors includes four weeks of vacation and two weeks of continuing education leave so if the plan doesn't add up to six weeks...

ASK how you can help your pastor take full advantage of the leave already being offered. There are many reasons pastors do not take that time. Sometimes the pastor isn't sure who will keep things going during the time away. Sometimes the church has given the pastor time for two weeks of continuing education but not the budget to use one of them! Sometimes the pastor cannot afford to take a vacation. Those are all things you can help with by...

ASK if your pastor is aware of the services available to them through the Board of Pensions like the [Well-Being Retreat](#) which offers a very affordable get-away to Montreat and the [Clergy Wellness Support program](#) that will give up to \$5,000 for pastors to step away and participate in a program that will help them focus on their vocational, spiritual, mental, and physical wellness.

HELP your pastor prepare for time away by assisting with lining up who will write liturgy, teach Sunday School, preach, etc. (I've had more than a few pastors tell me that preparing for vacation is often more stressful than not going at all!). This one is also often related to the over-functioning question above so take note if one of the things that needs to be lined up shouldn't be done by the pastor at all!

HELP your pastor take his or her continuing education leave by advocating for a reimbursement budget that will enable that time off and help your pastor find grants and scholarships to make up the difference. For example, [this one that we've been highlighting in the Enews for several weeks!](#)

HELP your pastor take a vacation by offering the use of your lake/beach/mountain house for a week. Don't have one? That's ok, make sure your pastor is aware of the host of people who do and who make them available to clergy for free or at reduced rates:

[List of Pastors' Retreats & Getaways](#)

[The Christian Hospitality Network](#)

[Pastor Retreat Centers](#)

Finally, in addition to the weekly cycle of days off and yearly cycle of vacation, the Church has established a pattern for pastors and congregations to take a step back and be refreshed every seven years. This pattern is based on the Sabbatical Year described in Leviticus 25 and it can be an excellent way to rejuvenate both the pastor and the congregation by participating in the larger cycles of work and rest that God has established. [The Committee on Ministry strongly recommends this practice and offers this policy as a starting point for conversation.](#) Sabbaticals require planning and preparation well in advance so I encourage pastors and sessions to reach out to me or the Committee on Ministry to talk about how you can start planning now.

May the Peace of Christ be with you,
Barry