



# PLANNING SABBATICALS

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A GUIDE FOR  
CONGREGATIONS  
AND THEIR  
PASTORS

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Planning Your Pastor's  
Sabbatical  
A Guide for Congregations

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To the congregations and pastors who step out in faith to pursue the chance to strengthen their shared ministry together by means of a renewal leave for their pastor, I honor you and hope the words shared in this book stand as tribute to your fidelity and courage.

# Introduction

A congregation on the north side of a large city was in a situation shared by so many other congregations: the demographics of the neighborhood around it were changing rapidly, and the members found themselves wondering how they could improve their ability to be hospitable to their new neighbors (many of whom were recent immigrants finding their way in the United States for the first time). So the congregation and its pastor had an idea: the pastor would take a sabbatical to venture abroad, to Nigeria, where the pastor had always wanted to go but also would know very few people. In other words, the pastor would need to be hosted. She would need to rely on the hospitality of others to find her way. The experience of being dislocated, of needing to be hosted, would give her a small taste of what the church's neighbors were experiencing, and this existential insight would provide her with a new frame with which to think about leading the congregation through its process of welcome.

Equally importantly, though, while the pastor was away, the congregation was not idle! During the pastor's three-month sabbatical, the congregation would call on several biblical scholars and theologians to visit the congregation and teach it about the crucial place of hospitality in the Christian life—hospitality in its biblical, historical, and theological dimensions. Whether it was Abraham hosting angels in the book of Genesis or Jesus sending his disciples out to receive (or not) welcome from villages on the road, the stories of the Bible enlivened the congregation's imagination while their pastor was away.

And then, when the reunion between the pastor and the congregation happened, a kind of alchemy occurred. The pastor

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had been touched at a soul level by the experience of being out of her element, but even more so by the continual kindness she encountered during her travel challenges. She had stories to tell, but also, more importantly, a deeply personal vigor for creating a space of hospitality for all who were dislocated in her own congregational context. Meanwhile, with the minds and hearts of so many members on those scriptural stories of hosting and being hosted, the congregation collectively had new ears to hear the pastor's testimony. Its members also had a fierce new energy for asking complex questions about how they could best be hosts in their community—not simply inviting their new neighbors to worship, but to accompany them in multifaceted ways as they sought to make their homes in an unfamiliar place. The renewal period, comprised of the pastor's sabbatical and the congregation's intentional use of the time, provided both a spiritual foundation and a holy goad toward a new season of shared ministry together.

This story is a particularly dramatic instance of the kind of alchemy that I want to explore in this book—the kind of magic that happens when a pastor's period of temporarily stepping away from the day-to-day responsibilities of ministry *and* the congregation's intentionality in using that time for its own spiritual growth weave together in such a way that the shared ministry between the pastor and congregation are renewed and strengthened.

Maybe “magic” is not the right word, since “magic” implies a kind of technique, a sort of “do this and this result will happen” mentality. Christians prefer to speak, not of magic, but of the work of the Holy Spirit—the wind that blows where it will (Jn. 3:8), but brings unpredictable blessings and abundant surprise wherever it does its work. The Greek word for spirit, *pneuma*, leads Christian theologians to describe certain things as “pneumatological”—the work of the Holy Spirit. I believe that a successful renewal leave experience is, in fact,

“pneumatological” in precisely that sense—when it goes well, we Christians bring our best efforts and intentionality and are once again surprised by what God’s Spirit can do. The blessings go above and beyond our expectations. The Holy Spirit creates new energy.

Not every renewal leave experience will be like the one described above. Sometimes the ambitions and the results of the experience are simpler: a pastor loves C.S. Lewis and travels to England and Ireland in order to walk in Lewis’s footsteps while the congregation back home reads *The Screwtape Letters* together, and the result is that the congregation is able to appreciate more deeply the regular Lewis quotes that the pastor puts in a sermon. The pastor spends time in the Holy Land seeing biblical sights, and the congregation notices a new level of dramatic vision and detail in the pastor’s Bible studies.

But simpler is not less holy. The same Spirit-led alchemy is at play any time a congregation honors its pastor and the ministry it shares with its pastor by pursuing a renewal experience. And, just as in Jesus’ parables, sometimes it is the simplest and humblest of seeds planted that eventually bear the richest fruit in ministry.

### **What Do We Mean by “Renewal Experience”?**

It would be good to get some terms clear that I will be using throughout the book.

As the title of the book promises, I intend for this book to be a guide for congregations that are exploring the possibility of sending their pastors on sabbatical. For the purposes of this book, I will define “pastoral sabbatical” as any extended period (I’ll be recommending three-to-four months) in which the pastor steps away from the day-to-day practices of ministry in order to focus on their spiritual development with an eye toward

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returning to the congregation with renewed energy for ministry.

Obviously, and as we will discuss at length, such focus can take any number of forms and center on lots of different activities; there is no one set model for what a sabbatical should look like, and when you consider the fact that God has given each of us—pastors included—different sorts of passions and gifts and life circumstances, then the variety of sabbaticals should be as wide as the blessed variety of pastors taking them.

**But** a “pastoral sabbatical” is, at minimum, an extended period of time in which the pastor is away from the congregation pursuing a variety of intentionally renewing activities.

What are those activities? Possibilities are virtually endless—as are the stories of what pastors have done with this time! A pastoral sabbatical can be travel abroad, to experience new cultures and have the imagination fired. It can be intensive time spent with loved ones, forging deep bonds that can continue to endure and thrive within the demands of ministry often placed upon the pastor’s whole family. It can be deep study, of theology or the Bible or history or the lives of inspiring figures. It can be time spent in creating—art, photography, painting, writing. It can be a time spent regaining health—exercising more, sleeping more deeply, eating better. It can be a time of recommitting to spiritual practices, such as prayer or daily devotions. It can be pilgrimage. It can be ease. Indeed, the best sabbaticals will encompass multiple activities, all with the goal of each individual pastor finding the rhythm that speaks to the soul.

Some pastors take courses in new subjects. Some pastors seclude themselves in cabins and write poems. Some pastors travel the world and see sights that are spiritually meaningful to them. Some reconnect with mentors from the past; some meet spiritual heroes in the present. Many reconnect with family and loved ones in unstructured time. Some sabbaticals are spent on

motorcycles, some on hiking trails, some on airplanes, some on beaches, some in monasteries. Indeed, most sabbaticals that I know of combine a whole host of these activities into a unified whole that speaks to various aspects of the pastor's soul (more on this below).

That said, this book is about more than sabbaticals. There is (thankfully) a growing number of books out there that give advice to pastors specifically about how to plan their own sabbaticals. But what I have in mind in this book is addressing the total package: not just the pastor's sabbatical (as important as that is), but the congregation's part as well. In other words, a "renewal experience" *includes* the pastoral sabbatical, but is *more* than that.

When I say "renewal period" or "renewal experience," I mean the *shared* experience between the pastor and the congregation. In my view, pastoral sabbaticals are *one* (important) piece of the broader picture. If you are a member of a congregation or a pastor of a congregation reading this book, I want you to think of the entire renewal experience—the early dreaming stages, the logistical planning, the pastor's leave, the congregation's activities, the reunion, and the shared ministry together after—as part of one unified process.

The term "sabbatical," even though it has deep biblical roots in the concept of "Sabbath rest," also carries overtones of academia. Academic sabbaticals are product-oriented: a professor takes a sabbatical to go away and write a book, or research a new skill. One can imagine a kind of pastoral sabbatical in which the pastor is going away to focus on skill-building—say, continuing education or sermon preparation or some such thing. But this is not what I have in mind when I say "renewal leave" or "sabbatical" in this book. In this book, the purpose of a pastoral sabbatical is not to produce a certain product, but for the pastor to regain energy and focus and

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connection to inner spiritual resources—all for the sake of being renewed for a long ministry with their congregation. The notion of “renewal” for shared ministry together keeps the focus where it needs to be—not on the individual pastor solely, but on the entire congregation that undertakes the adventure of the renewal period.

I was a pastor of a congregation for a time, which goes part of the way in explaining why in this book I am so adamant that something so significant as a pastoral sabbatical be undertaken as a shared endeavor between the pastor and the congregation. But the main fuel for that belief has been my work over the last six years as director of the Lilly Endowment Clergy Renewal Programs, which gives grants to over 150 congregations a year to support their pastors taking renewal leaves.<sup>1</sup> In that work, I have interfaced with thousands of congregations at various stages of discernment and planning for a renewal leave experience. And there is one lesson more than any other that has surfaced time and time again: the most successful pastoral sabbatical programs involve the entire congregation from start to finish.

As we will see, there are logistical reasons for involving the congregation in the sabbatical program: heavy congregational involvement at every stage of discerning, planning, and undertaking a renewal leave experience helps to ward off a lot of potential difficulties. But the positive rationale is even more compelling! If, as I believe, the point of a successful pastoral renewal leave is to strengthen the shared ministry of a pastor

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<sup>1</sup>In saying this about my work, I want to be clear that the anecdotes that are peppered throughout this book, unless otherwise noted, come from a broad range of discussions about pastoral sabbaticals and congregations' experience (not simply those participating in the Lilly Endowment Clergy Renewal Programs specifically); moreover, I have left any identifying details sufficiently vague as to protect the relevant confidentiality of pastors and their congregations.

and congregation so that they can pursue their calling together with even more passion, then deep engagement between the pastor and the congregation at every step is a positive gift that will yield major dividends throughout the process.

In saying this, I certainly don't want to give the impression that only parish pastors deserve sabbaticals or can benefit from them. As I'll try to make clear in the first chapter, I think that all sorts of professionals—from nurses to elementary school teachers to business executives and beyond—can (and ideally *should*) benefit from sabbaticals.

Moreover, I don't want to disregard the fact that a great deal of vital Christian ministry and leadership takes place in venues other than congregational ministry. Hospital chaplains, judicatory officials such as bishops and their assistants, intentional interim pastors, college ministry leaders, and others do incredible work on behalf of the church and the world. If someone in that sort of ministry setting is contemplating or actively planning a sabbatical, my hope is that at least some of what I say in this book will be applicable. That said, my framework in this book will be congregations seeking to undertake this renewal leave work alongside their pastors. Congregations are wonderful, complicated, unique places, and so we will focus attention there.

My hope for this book is that it is the sort of thing that congregational leaders (elders, council members, vestry, parish mutual ministry teams, or whatever leadership your congregation has in place) can read and discuss, together with their pastors, at any stage of the renewal leave process. Some congregations have long histories of pastors taking sabbaticals. Others might be hearing about the possibility for the first time. Some congregations will be made up of

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members<sup>2</sup> who are immediately supportive of pursuing the idea; other congregations may need months or even years to properly discern how best to shape a renewal period for their own contexts. Again, variety is of the Spirit and it is beautiful.

But wherever a congregation finds itself, I offer this little book as a “thinking-with” companion that stimulates excellent conversations among pastors and their people. I would like for this to be helpful for elder boards, church councils, vestries, or whatever partners in ministry help to guide major decisions in congregations—because renewal leaves are major decisions! There are lots of excellent resources available aimed at pastors who are planning their sabbaticals, and I will try to point to most of those in the pages ahead.

In my work, we often hear congregations attest that the process of dreaming and planning together was the most helpful part of the whole experience, and so this book is meant to be an aid to help that process be as rich as it can be. While there is some “practical” advice spread throughout the book, it is mostly designed as an invitation to dream well and wisely, and to let the wisdom of others inform what will ultimately be a highly personal process for the congregation and the pastor.

One more thing should be said at the outset, and it’s something that we all know but still bears repeating: courage and honor are related. It takes courage for congregations to bless their pastors being away for an extended period, just as it takes courage for pastors to unplug from their beloved ministry settings. It especially takes courage on all sides to explore

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<sup>2</sup>Throughout the book I’ll use the term *members* even though I know that many congregations now either do not have formal “membership” at all, or else membership is limited to a smaller section of a larger body of worshipers and active participants in the life of the congregation. So *members* should be understood as shorthand for everyone in the congregation who is active in its life and has a stake in its mission going well.

this possibility if the congregation has never had a history of pastors taking sabbaticals. If you are reading this book, if you are curious about beginning the process of discerning whether and how God might be calling you to consider this renewal leave possibility for your congregation, then I commend you on your courage *and* your willingness to honor your pastor and your pastor's loved ones by this action.

To honor ministry is to strengthen it. To embrace rest is to demonstrate confidence in the energy that God can pour into revitalized pastors and congregations. This book will be an invitation to dream about what that might look like for your pastor and your congregation.



# 1

## Shared Journey

### Why Pastoral Renewal Leaves Are Good for Congregations

This book will contain several mantras, and this chapter introduces one of the most important ones: *the better the renewal time for the congregation, the better the sabbatical time for the pastor, and vice versa*. If the congregation has a good experience with the renewal leave, it will not only help sustain the benefits of the pastor's sabbatical across the next years of shared ministry, but it will help ease both the mind of the pastor *and* the minds of the congregation members *during* the leave period.

So with that in mind, let's explore the dual benefit of clergy renewal leaves: a refreshed pastor and an inspired congregation.

#### **A Refreshed and Reenergized Pastor**

As we mentioned before, pastoral sabbaticals are not product-driven. We can put that a different way: the main "product," so to speak, of a successful pastoral sabbatical is a refreshed and renewed pastor.

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At the outset, we should stipulate two things: a pastor's work is not necessarily harder than that of other congregational members; but *it is hard in a different way*. In other words, the challenges of pastoral ministry in congregations, while not necessarily *more* intense than, say, an emergency medical technician or a public-school teacher or a construction worker, are *uniquely* intense in ways that pastoral renewal leaves can address.

Pastors serve many roles. Depending on the size and nature of the church, they are counselors, weekly public speakers, worship planners, physical plant consultants, Bible and theology teachers, youth faith encouragers, broken toilet fixers, community leaders, social justice advocates, and fundraisers. In communities where English is rare, they are often tutors, immigration counselors, and cultural mentors. They conduct weddings and funerals. Often, they are “on call” for congregational emergencies 24/7, and these emergencies might arise at 2 a.m.—or, smack in the middle of a planned family vacation. They work on Sundays and holidays. It is, as Marva Dawn says, an “odd and wondrous” calling, but it is also an intense one.

And that is just the visible, external work. At an even deeper level, much of the work of the pastor is internal and invisible. Put simply, pastors care at very deep levels, about a great many people, at the most intense points of those peoples' lives—when loved ones die, when tragedies befall children, when a routine day becomes a scary hospital stay, when God seems far away. Even accompanying their people in times of joy—weddings, graduations, periods of feeling intensely held by God—can produce what psychologists call “eustress”: vital, excited states of heightened emotion that feel wonderful but can also sometimes prove to be overwhelming. (Think of a time when you may have found yourself weeping during or after a joyous occasion; you know you “should” be happy, but your

body still feels flooded by emotions in a way that drains you.) In other words, much of the work of being a pastor is internal, emotional, and intense in ways that draw upon deep reserves of emotional and spiritual resources.

Fortunately, most pastors have deep wells. Pastors are trained—often in seminaries, but often too by mentorship and hands-on learning—to sustain themselves in prayer, study of God’s word, intellectual pursuits, and delight in family and friends. Healthy pastors are trained to engage in all the tasks mentioned above (and countless others) from a position of deep centeredness.

Craig Dykstra, an expert in the dynamics of pastoral ministry, writes the following:

Every day pastors are immersed in a constant, and sometimes nearly chaotic, interplay of meaning-filled relationships and demands. They attend to scripture; struggle to discern the gospel’s call and demand on them and their congregations in particular contexts; lead worship, preach and teach; respond to requests for help of all kinds from myriad people in need; live with children, youth and adults through life cycles marked by both great joy and profound sadness; and take responsibility for the unending work of running an organization with buildings, budgets, and public relations and personnel issues.

In the midst of the interplay of all this and more, pastors become who they are; indeed, pastors are transformed. The unique confluence of all these forces both requires and gives shape to an imagination marked by characteristics and features unlike those required in any other walk of life. Life lived long enough and fully enough in the pastoral office gives rise to a way of

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seeing in depth and of creating new realities that is an indispensable gift to the church, to all who are members of it, and indeed to public life and to the world.<sup>1</sup>

To be healthy, to achieve the “seeing in depth” and “creating new realities” that Dykstra describes, pastors need powerful internal spiritual resources as they move creatively and imaginatively throughout the work of ministry.

If you’ll forgive a pun, though, the logic of clergy sabbaticals is that such resources are indeed “renew-able.” Prayer, spiritual disciplines, delight in loved ones and hobbies, and rest all require time and attention to cultivate—as we will see throughout this book.

Another of the mantras that I will repeat throughout the book, and that I will introduce now, is as follows: *sabbaticals are for healthy pastors in healthy congregations*. We’ll spend a lot of time in later chapters exploring more about what that means, but here I bring it up as a way of emphasizing that sabbatical leaves are about revitalizing and renewing healthy pastors who could use some time to re-center in the very things that allow them to be excellent at their work: prayer, God’s word, spiritual practices, and delight in their loved ones. Soul care requires soul maintenance.

Laurie Haller, a Methodist pastor who wrote a memoir about her sabbatical experience, had this to say about the effects of the months away spent in exploration and prayer:

I feel more centered and calm than I have in 25 years. Most people will not observe that simply by looking at me. I am the same on the outside. Inside, however,

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<sup>1</sup>Craig Dykstra, “Imagination and the Pastoral Life,” available at <https://www.religion-online.org/article/imagination-and-the-pastoral-life/>.

I have been changed and transformed. It's not to say I won't be busy come next Monday. Being a pastor in a large church will always be demanding. And I don't think God necessarily wants me to be less busy. God only wants me to realign my priorities. God wants to be the center of my attention. When love of God comes before anything else, I am convinced that I will be able to stay centered and grounded.<sup>2</sup>

Congregations whose pastors have returned from sabbaticals often report that their pastors exhibit, simultaneously, a renewed energy but also a deeper calm. This great combination of energy and centeredness can positively impact everything from sermons to Bible studies to committee leadership to pastoral care. It is a lesson at the heart of our Christian faith: when we are centered in God, the labor that we are called to do in God's vineyard moves with greater ease, but also more excellence.

There is a line in the movie *Top Gun* in which the commander says to the new pilots, "Gentlemen, you are the top 1 percent of all naval aviators. The elite. The best of the best. We'll make you better." Renewal leaves are not for fixing broken or burnt-out pastors, or for healing deeply wounded congregations. They are for excellent pastors who want to re-center in order to continue to be excellent.

I once sat next to a pastor at a conference dinner while they discussed their sabbatical leave. They said something that has stayed with me, and that I have come to value as a powerful image for what sabbaticals can do. "I thought I would come back full," they said. "Full of new ideas for church programs,

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<sup>2</sup>Laurie Haller, *Recess: Rediscovering Play and Purpose* (Canton: Cass Community Publishing, 2015), 218.

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full of insights for sermons, full of outreach strategies. Instead, I came back empty. Emptied of pride, emptied of ego, emptied of thinking that it was all about me. It turns out that I didn't need for God to fill me; I needed time for God to empty me. And when I came back to my congregation empty, that's when God was ready to fill all of us with new possibilities that I would have been too full to see if God had not emptied me first."

We'll say a lot more about what this means in future chapters, but for now we can name the fact that one of the two main goals of any successful renewal program is a revitalized and refreshed pastor. What is the other main goal?

### **An Inspired Congregation**

I'll say it over and over again in this book: what happens with the pastor and the pastor's loved ones during a renewal period is only half the equation. Renewal leaves are not just about the pastor. A successful pastoral renewal leave is just as much about what happens before, during, and after the leave on the part of the congregation. The renewal leave does not "belong" to the pastor; the whole process, start to finish, belongs to the congregation. This is the recipe for success during *and* after the renewal period.

What can happen on the congregation's end? My favorite story of this comes from my colleague Marty, who pastors a dynamic congregation in central Indiana. Marty has taken two clergy sabbaticals during his tenure in the congregation, and the two yielded quite different—but ultimately equally powerful—experiences for the congregation.

During Marty's first leave, his congregation was nervous but excited to undertake the adventure of stepping up in his absence. While a variety of guest preachers filled the pulpit to preach, it was key congregational leaders who volunteered

to take on more tasks in the day-to-day administration of the church that really sparked a new season of energy in the church while Marty was away. When he returned, he joked that he had to put his ego in check when he saw that attendance and giving had actually gone up in his absence!

(*Note:* the congregation's deeply sincere, warm welcome upon his return helped to ease his mind on the "feeling wanted" front!)

But the congregation's lay leadership stepping up during this first leave had another effect. Once some members took a turn at supervising some ministries that had been on the pastor's plate, they found that they didn't want to give them up! Sunday school superintending, music ministries, youth group supervision—things that, in that congregation, had traditionally all been on the pastor's plate—were suddenly disbursed permanently throughout the lay leadership. Given that one of Marty's insights on his sabbatical was that he was probably taking on too many tasks as pastor within the congregation and thus needed to trust his people to exercise more leadership, the timing was perfect. Not only did existing leaders feel empowered to take on more responsibility, but new leaders had come out of the woodwork, ready to help the entire congregation shoulder the tasks of a newly energized season of ministry.

When Marty left for his second sabbatical, seven years later, the congregation might have expected that the same thing would happen: greater attendance, a surge of energy among the members. But when Marty returned after four months away, his senior leaders reported a concern: attendance had gone down during this second leave, and, moreover, a number of major congregational leaders had seemingly disappeared over the summer. What had changed? The leaders were not sure.

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Undaunted, Marty took to the pulpit on the Sunday after he returned, and...attendance and giving surged back. Upon reflection, Marty and his staff realized that, during this second leave, congregational leaders themselves had decided to take a sabbatical! Rather than digging in and taking on more heavy lifting as they had during the first renewal leave, many congregational leaders had followed their pastor's lead and had spent the summer focusing quietly on their own spiritual health, their own families, their own sense of centeredness. And, like Marty, when they returned, they returned rejuvenated and ready to grow even further!

At this point, it will not surprise you to learn that Marty and his congregation had worked very closely together in the discernment and design of the two renewal periods. In order to achieve the Spirit-filled alchemy, the process had to be collaborate from the very earliest stages all the way to the end of the leave. We'll see more about what this can look like in chapters to come.

But for now, what we can know for sure is that the flip side of a renewed pastor is a rejuvenated congregation. These are the two main goals of clergy renewal leaves, and they go hand in hand. This is not the congregation giving the pastor a sabbatical as a kind of favor. This is the congregation and the pastor, *together*, embarking on the renewal experience. It may seem like a small difference, but it makes all the difference!

And the two goals mutually reinforce each other. The better the renewal period goes for the congregation, the more fulfilling the sabbatical will be for the pastor, and vice versa. In a healthy congregational renewal process, what's good for the pastor is not somehow in competition with the needs of the congregation; instead, the two build on each other in surprising and Spirit-filled ways.

Congregations who complete renewal leaves successfully are built up by the experience in a number of ways. They gain new insights into the ways their ministry is about more than what the pastor does, and they gain confidence that their staff and members can take on leadership in the pastor's absence in ways that might well continue even after the pastor has returned. The pastor's sabbatical gives the congregation permission to explore similar topics and themes as the pastor who is away, "journeying alongside" their pastor so that wisdom and insights can be shared upon the pastor's return. And the ability for congregations to honor beloved pastors (and families!) with the gift of renewal can produce a significant morale boost for congregations of all kinds.

As Melissa Bane Sevier remarks, "Pastoral leaders who are healthy find they stay longer in their congregations, and congregations with healthy pastors are healthy themselves. Our culture may idolize the workaholic leader, but that leadership style does not best serve the congregation. Balanced leaders make for balanced congregations."<sup>3</sup>

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Congregations have different levels of ambition for what they want out of renewal periods. For some congregations, the chance to honor the pastor and have them come back refreshed is enough—and that is okay! For other congregations, the leave presents a chance for deep dives into areas of passion for the congregation—study, service, introspection, etc. That is just fine as well.

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<sup>3</sup>Melissa Bane Sevier, *Journeying Toward Renewal: A Spiritual Companion for Pastoral Sabbaticals* (Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute, 2002), 63.

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The main thing to do is to always have the courage to make it about *your* congregation and *your* context. What would renewal look like for you, in all of your blessed God-given particularity? What is special about your congregation and your pastor that can lead you to work together to craft an experience that no other congregation would delight in as much?

If you are dreaming along these lines, and if you are starting to envision what this might look like for your congregation, then the next question will be: How do you get started having the conversation? This is what we will turn to next.