

Sabbatical Rest



As I look back on it now it seems impossible that it was over eleven years ago that I completed my ministry at Jackson Springs Presbyterian Church and was ordained by this Chapel as its next pastor. I was to follow my longtime mentor, Reverend Don Welch who had the honor of being the first part-time, solo pastor of this church following thirty years of rotating guest ministers. I was to join Reverend Fran Stark so that together we could further the mission of the Chapel in the Pines as we cared for its members.

Three years later, under the leadership of Board President, John Caggiano the people of this church came together in a year-long process to envision the future of the Chapel. This discerning effort became known as "Growing Into God's Call...Together". The first decision made by the membership was that to achieve the goals set out in this plan, the Chapel would need a full-time pastor. I was then called to take that position and it became my honor to be the Chapel's first full-time, solo Pastor and Head of Staff. To serve the people of this Chapel as part-time and full-time pastor for almost twelve years now has been one of the greatest joys of my life.

Now, let me take you back eight years to the time I was offered my first full-time employment contract. It was then that the members of our Board of Directors proposed to include in that contract a provision granting their new minister a sabbatical after seven years of full-time service to God through this church. To tell you the truth, seven years seemed like a very long time to me and I thought that if I was blessed to be the pastor here for seven years...just a year short of Don Welch's eight year ministry...that I would surely consider that a professional and God ordained success.

So, in 2024 I became eligible to begin my sabbatical which was originally designed to last three months. However, Chapel Boards that followed the writing of that original employment contract had agreed that I would be allowed to take the three months at one time or I could take it in increments over several years if that would be best for me and for the Chapel. Last year the Board and I agreed that it was not the best time for me to begin my sabbatical so it was delayed until this year...and specifically to the Fall of 2025.

So, what is a sabbatical, what is the origin of this concept, is it a biblical idea, and why is it good for the church and for the pastor? The word "sabbatical" comes from the Hebrew word "Sabat" meaning Sabbath, which is a day of rest dedicated to God. Sabbath rest, at its core, is a divinely ordained day of rest and worship, rooted in the biblical account of creation where God rested on the seventh day. So, a sabbatical is the stringing together of a number of Sabbath days.

A sabbatical for a minister is an extended period of time, typically 3-6 months, away from normal pastoral duties, designed for rest, renewal, and spiritual growth. It is not a vacation but rather a structured break to prevent burnout, deepen a pastor's relationship with God, and anticipate the pastor's return with renewed energy and perspective. Sabbaticals are seen as an investment in the pastor's long-term well-being and effectiveness in ministry.

In the Old Testament the concept of rest and periods of ceasing from labor is deeply rooted in biblical principles, particularly in the observance of the Sabbath. The fourth commandment in the Ten Commandments instructs the observance of the Sabbath day. "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God." Particularly in the laws given to the Israelites, there were provisions for the observance of sabbatical years. According to the book of Leviticus, every seventh year was designated as a sabbatical year, during which the land was to rest from cultivation, debts were to be forgiven, and slaves were to be set free. In the New Testament (Mark 2:23-28 and Luke 13:10-17) Jesus talks often about the actions related to the Sabbath. He emphasizes the Sabbath's purpose of restoration and healing that challenged the more legalistic interpretations of his time.

I will be taking one month of my three month sabbatical from September 22nd through October 19th. During this time you will all enjoy hearing from four guest preachers and many of my duties will be assumed by staff and volunteers. I want to thank everyone for the extra effort they will supply during my absence. I look forward to returning to you with new energy and focus so that we might serve our community by preaching, teaching, and living the gospel of Jesus Christ...together.

