

Eugene Peterson, the author of *The Message* and 30 pastoral books writes:

We were both apprehensive, my wife and I. We had been away from our congregation for twelve months, **a sabbatical year**, and we were on our way back. It had been a wonderful year, soaking in the silence, gulping down great drafts of high-country air. Could we handle the transition from the solitude of the Montana Rockies to the traffic of Maryland? Being a pastor is a difficult job, maybe no harder than any other job - any job done well requires everything that is in us - but hard all the same. For a year we had not done it: no interruptive phone calls, no exhilarating/exhausting creativity at pulpit and lectern, no doggedly carried out duties. We played and we prayed. We split wood and shovelled snow We read and talked over what we read. We cross-country skied in the winter and hiked in the summer. Every Sunday we did what we had not done for thirty years: we sat together and worshiped God. We went to the Eidsvold Lutheran Church in Somers with seventy or eighty other Christians, mostly Norwegians, and sang hymns that we didn't know very well. Pastor Pris led us in prayer and preached rich sermons.

Comfortable in the pew on an April Sunday, I had an inkling of what the pastor had been doing that week - the meetings he had attended and the crises he had endured. While the Spirit was using his sermon to speak quite personally to me, at the edges of my mind I was admiringly aware of the sheer craft, exegetically and homiletically, behind it. Then, as people who sit in church pews often do, I mentally wandered. How does he do that week after week? How does he stay so fresh, so alert, so on target, so alive to people and Christ? And in the midst of all this stress and emotion and study and ecclesiastical shopkeeping? That's got to be the toughest job on earth - I could never do that. I'm glad I don't have a job like that.

And then I realized, But I do have a job like that; that is my job - or will be, again, in a few months. Those "few months" were now whittled down to "next week." We weren't sure we were up to it. Maybe the sabbatical, instead of refreshing us, had only spoiled us. Instead of energizing, maybe it had enervated us. For thirty years we had lived a hundred or so feet down in the ocean of parish life (how much pressure per square inch is that?) and for a year of sabbatical we had surfaced, basking in the sun, romping in the snow. Deep-sea divers enter decompression chambers as they leave the depths, lest they get the bends. We felt an equivalent need for a "recompression chamber" as we returned to the depths.

From Montana to the East Coast, Interstate 90 stretches out an inviting beeline, nearly straight, with a couple of sweeping curves (but bees also buzz curves). But we veered off on a detour south to the high desert of Colorado for a four-day retreat at a monastery. The monastery, we hoped, would be our recompression chamber. It was not as if we hadn't had time for prayer. We had never had so much time for it. But we sensed the need for something else now - a community of prayer, some friends with a vocation for

prayer among whom we could immerse our vocation as pastor. So for four days we prayed in a community that prayed.

The days had an easy rhythm: morning prayers in the chapel with the monks and other retreatants at 6 o'clock; evening prayers at 5 o'clock; before and after and in between, silence - walking, reading, praying, emptying. The rhythm broke on Sunday. After morning prayers and the Eucharist, everyone met for a noisy and festive breakfast. The silence had dug wells of joy that now spilled into the community in artesian conversation and laughter.

When we left the monastery, the Montana sabbatical year was, as we had intended in our praying, behind us emotionally as well as geographically. Three days later we arrived in Maryland, focused and explosive with energy.

Stimulus for Sabbatical

The idea for a sabbatical developed from a two-pronged stimulus: fatigue and frustration. I was tired. That's hardly unusual in itself, but it was a tiredness that vacations weren't fixing - a tiredness of spirit, an inner boredom. I sensed a spiritual core to my fatigue and was looking for a spiritual remedy.

Along the way as a pastor, I had also become a writer. I longed for a stretch of time to express some thoughts about my pastoral vocation, time that was never available while I was in the act of being a pastor.

A sabbatical year seemed to serve both needs perfectly. But how would I get it? I serve a single-pastor church, and there was no money to fund a sabbatical: Who would replace me while I was away? How would I pay for the venture? The two difficulties seemed formidable. But I felt that if the sabbatical was in fact the spiritual remedy to a spiritual need, the church ought to be able to come up with a solution.

I started by calling several of the leaders in the congregation and inviting them to my home for an evening. I told them what I felt and what I wanted. I didn't ask them to solve the problem, but asked them to enter into seeking a solution with me. They asked a lot of questions; they took me seriously; they perceived it as a congregational task; they started to see themselves as pastor to me. When the evening ended, we had not solved the difficulties, but I knew I had allies praying, working, and thinking with me. The concept of "sabbatical" filled out and developed momentum. Over a period of several months, the "mountains" moved.

Replacement: This turned out to be not much of a difficulty at all. My denomination offered help in locating an interim pastor - there are quite a few men and women who are available for just such work. We decided finally to call a young man who had recently served as an intern with us.

Funding: We worked out a plan in which the church paid me one-third of my salary, and I arranged for the other two-thirds. I did this by renting out my house for the year and asking a generous friend for assistance. We had a family home on a lake in Montana where my parents, now deceased, had lived and we had always vacationed. It was suited to our needs for solitude, and we could live there inexpensively.

Detail after detail fell into place, not always easily or quickly, but after ten months the sabbatical year was agreed upon and planned. I interpreted what we were doing in a letter to the congregation:

"Sabbatical years are the biblically based provision for restoration. When the farmer's field is depleted, it is given a sabbatical - after six years of planting and harvesting, it is left alone for a year so that the nutrients can build up in it. When people in ministry are depleted, they also are given a sabbatical - time apart for the recovery of spiritual and creative energies. I have been feeling the need for just such a time of restoration for about two years. The sense that my reserves are low, that my margins of creativity are crowded, becomes more acute each week. I feel the need for some 'desert' time - for silence, for solitude, for prayer. "

"One of the things I fear most as your pastor is that out of fatigue or sloth I end up going through the motions, substituting professional smoothness for personal grappling with the life of the Spirit in our life together. The demands of pastoral life are strenuous, and there is no respite from them. There are not many hours in any day when I am not faced with the struggle of faith in someone or another, the deep, central, eternal energies that make the difference between a life lived to the glory of God and a life wasted in self-indulgence or trivialized in diversions. I want to be ready for those encounters. For me, that is what it means to be a pastor: to be in touch with the Lord's Word and presence, and to be ready to speak and act out of that Word and presence in whatever I am doing - while leading you in worship, teaching Scripture, talking and praying with you individually, meeting with you in groups as we order our common life, writing poems and articles and books. "

"It is in this capacity for intensity and intimacy, staying at the centre where God's Word makes things alive, that I feel in need of repletion. The demands are so much greater today than they were in earlier years. One of the things that twenty-three years of pastoral life among you means is that there is a complex network of people both within and without the congregation with whom I am in significant relationship. I would not have it otherwise. But I must also do something to maintain the central springs of compassion and creativity lest it all be flattened out into routines.

"Parallel with this felt need for 'desert' time, I feel the need for 'harvest' time. These twenty-three years with you have been full and rich. I came here inexperienced and

untutored. Together, taught by the Spirit and by each other, we have learned much: You have become a congregation; I have become a pastor. During this time, I realized that writing is an essential element in my pastoral vocation with you. All the writing comes out of the soil of this community of faith as we worship together, attend to Scripture, seek to discern the Spirit's presence in our lives. As I write, a growing readership expresses appreciation and affirms me in the work. Right now, so much that is mature and ripe for harvest remains unwritten. I want to write what we have lived together. I don't want to write on the run, hastily, or carelessly. I want to write this well, to the glory of God. "

Jan and I talked about this, prayed together, and consulted with persons whom we hold to be wise. The obvious solution was to accept a call to another congregation. That would provide the clean simplicity of new relationships uncomplicated by history and the stimulus of new beginnings. But we didn't want to leave here if we could find another way; the life of worship and love that we have developed together is a great treasure that we will part with only if required. We arrived at the idea of the sabbatical, a year away for prayer and writing so that we would be able to return to this place and this people and do our very best in ministry with you.

Structure for the Sabbatical

And so it happened. Twelve months away from my congregation. Twelve months to pray and write, to worship and walk, to converse and read, to remember and revision.

From the outset we had conceived of the sabbatical as a joint enterprise, meeting a spiritual need in both pastor and congregation. We didn't want the year to be misinterpreted as an escape; we didn't want to be viewed as "off doing their own thing." We were committed to this congregation. The sabbatical was provided to deepen and continue our common ministry. How could we convey that? How could we cultivate our intimacy in the faith and not have the geographic separation separate us spiritually?

We decided to write a monthly "Sabbatical Letter" in two parts, "Jan's side" and "Eugene's side." We sent a roll of film along with the letter; a friend developed the pictures of our life that month and displayed them in the narthex. The letters and pictures did exactly what we had hoped. But only one side of the letters seems to have been read closely - Jan's. I couldn't quit preaching. She conveyed the sabbatical experience.

Brita Stendahl wrote once that the sabbatical year she and her husband, Krister, had in Sweden "gave us our lives back." Jan's side of the sabbatical letters revealed that dimension of our year for our worshiping and believing friends at home. She set the tone in the first letter: "Separated from us by 2,500 miles, my mother-in-law was always pleased to get a letter from us. Because Eugene was her eldest and out `seeking

adventures! both physically and ideologically, she was always glad to be stretched by his cosmic and theological letters. He would share with her all the Big Ideas.

But being a mother and homemaker, she especially liked to hear from me because I would tell her what we were having for dinner, the latest troubles or triumphs of her grandchildren, the rips in their clothing, and the precocious oracles from their mouths. You can read the Big Ideas on the other side of the page, but here is my mother-in-law letter to you, our dear family at Christ Our King.

"The trip across the country was good. We camped out a couple of nights on the way. We took to heart most of the well-wishing advice you gave us as we left, but the numerous admonitions to dress warmly didn't `take.' Our first night in Montana we camped at the headwaters of the Missouri River and managed to freeze the particular that it isn't proper to mention in a church newsletter. We brought the dog into the tent for added warmth, but she wasn't as much help as we needed. The night sky was stunning with its brilliant stars all the way down to the horizon. (I never knew stars went all the way down to the horizon!) The tent was ice coated in the morning. "

The first week here has been spent cleaning, rearranging, and trying to get the house warm enough. I think I am finally getting the knack of building a wood fire. We have interspersed our settling in with walks in the woods and reading aloud to each other.

"One day we took off for Glacier Park to see dozens of bald eagles fishing for the salmon spawning in MacDonald Creek. Last year on the peak day, over five hundred were sighted. After our birding we hiked to Avalanche Lake, two and one-half miles up into a glacial cirque. It was a day marvellous in weather - snow flurries, sun, wind, clouds. "

We have about thirty ducks swimming around our bay here on the lake. Last Sunday we returned from worship and saw a furry creature on our dock licking himself dry and realized it was a mink. "

Eric and Lynn came over from Spokane for the weekend. We had Eugene's brother and sister and their families for a potluck Friday evening. That was a happy reunion and a good time. One of our prayers for this year is that our family gatherings will be rich and full. One of the last things that we asked Mabel Scarborough to do for us before leaving Bel Air was to update a church directory so that we could pray for you, our faith family, each day. Be assured of our love and our prayers. We feel very close to you. For supper tonight we had creamed tuna over sourdough biscuits."

Such was the nature of our time. Once we arrived in Montana, we established a routine to support our twin goals of desert and harvest so that we would not fritter away the year. We agreed on a five-day work week, with Saturday and Sunday given to playing and praying. I worked hard for about five hours a day at my writing desk and then relaxed. We had evening prayers in the late afternoon and followed that by reading aloud to each

other and fixing supper. After nine months of this, I had the two books written that I had set out to complete the harvest, from then on it was all reading and praying and hiking.

Refit for Ministry

Everything I had hoped for came to pass: I returned with more energy than I can remember having since I was fifteen years old. I have always (with occasional, but brief, lapses) enjoyed being a pastor. But never this much. The experience of my maturity was now coupled with the energy of my youth, a combination I had not thought possible. The parts of pastoral work I had done out of duty before, just because somebody had to do them, I now embraced with delight. I felt deep reservoirs within me, capacious and free flowing. I felt great margins of leisure around everything I did - conversations, meetings, letter writing, telephone calls. I felt I would never again be in a hurry. The sabbatical had done its work.

A benefit I had not counted on was a change in the congregation. They were refreshed and confident in a way I had not observed before. One of the dangers of a long-term pastorate is the development of neurotic dependencies between pastor and people. I had worried about that from time to time: Was it healthy of me to stay in this congregation for so long? Had I taken the place of God for them?

Those fears became more acute when I proposed the sabbatical year, for many people expressed excessive anxiety - anxiety that I would not return, anxiety that the church could not get along without me, anxiety that the life of faith and worship and trust that we had worked so hard to develop would disintegrate in my absence. None of these fears was realized. Not one. Not even a little bit. The congregation thrived. They found they did not need me at all. They discovered they could be a church of Jesus Christ with another pastor quite as well as they could with me. I returned to a congregation confident in its maturity as a people of God.

A recent incident, seemingly trivial, illustrates the profound difference that keeps showing up in a variety of situations. About twenty-five of us were going on an overnight leadership retreat. We had agreed to meet in the church parking lot at 5:45 to car-pool together. I made a hospital visit that took longer than planned and arrived five minutes late - to an empty parking lot. They had left me. Before the sabbatical, that would never have happened; now that kind of thing happens all the time. They can take care of themselves and know that I can take care of myself. Maturity.

Both the congregation and I are experiencing a great freedom in that neither neurotically needs each other. I am not dependent on them; they aren't dependent on me. That leaves us free to appreciate each other and receive gifts of ministry from each other.

Eugene H. Peterson.

The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction.