

# A Personal Reflection on Sabbaticals

*Ministry Today 36: March 2006*

By Paul Beasley-Murray

Senior Minister of Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford, and Chair of Ministry Today

For many years the Baptist Union, as I imagine most other denominations, has encouraged its ministers to take a three-month period of sabbatical every seven years or so after ordination. And what a gift these sabbaticals are! For ministers can become “weary in well-doing”. In the words of Roy Oswald, a distinguished American church consultant:

“Like Sisyphus and the rock, there is a repetitive intensity in ministry that exacts its price in weariness of spirit, diminished enthusiasm, a dulling of the capacity to be creative, and a loss of vision and perspective. These are serious defects in any profession, but especially critical in the ministry with its challenge to provide spiritual, intellectual, ethical and institutional leadership”.

A sabbatical is an occasion for taking a break from the everyday round of ministry and for being set free to re-charge one’s batteries, physically and mentally, emotionally and spiritually. It is an occasion for nourishing one’s soul and for encountering God anew through un-pressurised times of prayer and Bible study. It is an occasion for broadening one’s horizons and for developing fresh skills through reading and study, through experimentation and travel; it is an occasion for reflecting on and taking stock of the past, with all its apparent successes and failure, and for gaining new hope and new vision for the future. Or in the words of Richard Bullock, an American Episcopalian bishop:

*“A sabbatical...can be a life and soul changing time - a time when perspective and the Holy Spirit can come together”*

Precisely how ministers take a break from the every-day round of ministry varies enormously. One good friend spent most of his three-month sabbatical playing golf! If I am honest, the ‘play’ element of sabbatical has not featured highly in the way I have used my own sabbaticals. I have tended to use them as an opportunity to stretch the mind, and then to write up what I have learned. At the risk of appearing self-centred, I thought it might be of interest to describe how I have approached sabbaticals, past and present.

When I took my first sabbatical in the summer of 1978, after having been in the ministry for eight years, I spent almost three months in the USA studying church growth in a wide variety of situations. As a result of this experience, and after further research, in 1980 (with Alan Wilkinson) I co-authored my first book, *Turning the Tide: an Assessment of Baptist Church Growth in England*. In that book we sought to test out on

350 English Baptist churches the seven so-called 'vital signs of a healthy growing church' advocated by the American church growth consultant, Peter Wagner, and in the light of the results we developed a model for church life where the emphasis was on discipleship rather than growth, in the belief where there was a healthy church there would be a growing church - shades of a thesis later developed by Rick Warren of Saddleback.

It was not until 1989 that I was able to take my second sabbatical. This took the form of a two-month period of study leave in Cambridge, where I spent the time writing *Dynamic Leadership*. The inspiration for this book was John Adair, the British leadership development consultant who defined the good leader as one who "works as a senior partner with other members to achieve the task, build the team, and meet individual needs". I applied this definition to the church, with the task as the mission of the church, and the team as either the church's leadership team or the church itself, and then developed the needs of individuals in fivefold terms:

1. a need to be led in worship
2. a need to be taught
3. a need to receive pastoral care
4. a need to experience fellowship, and ...
5. a need to find avenues of service.

In 1997 I was able to take a further three month sabbatical. The first month was devoted to personal spiritual renewal. The next two months were spent in the sunshine of Dordogne, where along with relaxing in the pool, I wrote *The Message of the Resurrection* in IVP's 'The Bible Speaks Today' series. That particular sabbatical was unusual in that I spent it in the company of one of my sons, who, when not writing his PhD thesis, acted as my batman and cook.

Now, as I write, I am about to enjoy my fourth sabbatical. But this time it's going to be different again. I have set myself no writing goals. Frankly, having had two books published in 2005 (*Joy to the world: Preaching at Christmas* and *Transform your Church: 50 very practical steps*), together with a booklet on bereavement and also new editions of three other publications, I need to re-stock my mind and broaden my experience. So for the first three months of 2006, I will be looking at church life in Australia and New Zealand. It's not my first experience of life 'down-under'. However, I was so stimulated by previous visits, that I felt I would like to visit them again. Like the UK, both Australia and New Zealand are largely secularised societies, but, in spite of the challenges, many churches are adopting adventurous patterns of mission. I believe that I have a lot to learn from our Antipodean 'cousins'. Yes, life is different there, yet not too dissimilar to that which we experience here in the UK.

In contrast to previous sabbaticals, I confess that I have found the preparation of this present sabbatical quite stressful. It has been difficult planning things at a distance, particularly when in New Zealand I am trying to meet up with pastors in what is their

peak holiday season. It has also proved to be more expensive than I had originally envisaged, even though for most of the time I shall be enjoying the hospitality of friends. The Baptist Union sabbatical grant of £375 does not go very far. My church has been generous: not only will it continue to pay my stipend (although this is the norm, I think it is nonetheless kind of them), but they have also bought for my use (as distinct for me - a distinction which avoids tax implications) a splendid state-of-the-art wireless lap top for the inevitable note-taking and writing, and also for e-mailing family and friends back home. Yet in spite of all this generosity, I could not get by without a good deal of investment of my own.

My sabbatical consists of four components. The first is '*resting*': it involves an opportunity to recover from the stresses and strains of ministry. My sabbatical will therefore have an element of holiday and of fun, as well as an opportunity to nourish my soul.

The second component is '*renewing the vision*'. After 35 years in ministry, my sabbatical will be a good time to gain a fresh vision for the next ten or so years of ministry (God willing!). Over the next three months I have arranged to meet a number of 'significant persons' who will hopefully spark off fresh ideas of doing mission and ministry today. Somewhat rashly (and indeed unthinkingly) I have said to myself that I want to come up with as many as 50 new 'thoughts'. If I only end up with 35, so be it!

The third component will be '*researching*'. I want to look at issues such as patterns of team ministry; the role of the church meeting in larger Baptist churches; commitment in a post-modern world; surviving and thriving in ministry; fruition in ministry.

The final component is '*resourcing*'. I find myself energised as I act as a resource person to churches and above all ministers. So friends have kindly put together for me a limited programme of preaching and teaching. Maybe 'limited' is a slight understatement, for every Sunday I am preaching - on one occasion three times in the day. I am also giving lectures to theological students in Sydney and Canberra - indeed, in one mad week at Perth I am teaching 36 hours on a crash MA module in ministry.

Yes, I acknowledge that perhaps compared with some ministers on sabbatical, I have a fairly crowded programme before me. But it is not work in the normal sense of the word. For instance, I will not have the deadlines of ensuring that new sermons are prepared every week; nor will I have the pressure of running a large organisation; nor indeed will I have the care of individuals in need. To a large extent I shall be free to be. As a result my hope and prayer is that I will return a *re-created* minister of the Gospel!