Clergy Renewal Programs (Part II): Renewal is Key to Pastors' Sabbaticals

By Tracy Schier

This is the second of two articles about programs providing grants to religious leaders. These initiatives allow them to take time away from their demanding lives in order to renew themselves spiritually, physically, emotionally, intellectually and in their personal relationships.

The Lilly Endowment’s Clergy Renewal Programs (one for leaders of Indiana congregations and the other for pastors nationwide) and the Louisville Institute’s Sabbatical Grant for Pastoral Leaders both grew out of the Endowment Religion Division’s long-standing effort to support programs and activities that strengthen congregations and enhance the growth and effectiveness of leaders of congregations and religious organizations.

The first article, “Clergy Renewal Programs (Part I): Taking Time to Renew Ministerial Vocations” focused on what the sabbaticals and clergy renewal grants programs strive to accomplish, what promise they hold for grant recipients, and what are some expectations as well as pitfalls. This article highlights the experiences of several pastoral leaders who experienced sabbaticals.

Robert Lee Hill served as Senior Minister of the Community Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Kansas City, Missouri for fifteen years before taking a three month sabbatical in 2001. During that time he visited 35 religious sites among visits to locations of personal historical significance such as the place of his ordination, his boyhood home, and a family cemetery site. Diversity issues and the church were paramount in the planning of sites and of the persons he would contact during his time away. Among those people (and/or the institutions they founded) he visited were Howard Thurman’s former pulpit at the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco; Johnny Ray Youngblood at St. Paul Community Baptist Church in Brooklyn; Alvin O. Jackson at National City Christian Church; David Garcia at the San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio; Doug Deuel at Central Christian Church in San Antonio; Suzanne Webb at Park Avenue Christian Church in New York City, and Forrest
Church at All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City. In addition to his site visits, Hill was able to read 26 books and write 14 new poems.

The highlights of Hill's sabbatical experience were many. Among these were, "'Discovering' Howard Thurman's first book (The Greatest of These) in the Pendle Hill Retreat Center library; becoming friends with Forrest Church; beholding the resiliency of New Yorkers and people everywhere after the 9/11 attacks; preaching in Howard Thurman's pulpit; eating barbecue and discussing John Lewis's genius for nonviolence with Will Campbell. And spending time showing (wife) Priscilla where I grew up."

When asked to describe any low points, Hill says that one of the hardest things he ever had to do in his entire time at Community Christian Church was not to return home to his pulpit after the attacks of September 11. He says, "I ached to be with Community's faithful, to attempt to be of some use and comfort. Calls from Community members and friends throughout Kansas City came to me in the place where I was situated in Texas and also through the church office. There were requests to speak or be present at civic events and with community media. But the wise, disciplined hearts of Community's leadership team kept us going onward to New York and Washington, and, in the end, to go on with the sabbatical was indeed the right thing to do." Hill goes on to say that the events of 9/11 occurred precisely in the middle of the sabbatical time and "served to heighten the precious nature of all human relationship, including marriage relationships, and as pastor and people, and the necessity for a firmer commitment to the gospel's high calling to diversity."

A great concern of pastors taking sabbaticals is how their congregation will cope with their absence and use the time effectively. Hill reports, "In my absence, the strengths of our lay people were exercised fully." A group called the S.O.A.R. (Sabbatical Oversight Ad hoc Review) saw to implementation of sabbatical strategies. Planning began with an informative brochure about the sabbatical for the entire congregation that was distributed in a pastoral letter. Through consultation with the ministerial staff and lay leadership of the Administrative Council, the S.O.A.R. group assumed responsibility for coverage of such things as hospital calling, bereavement visitation, administration, funerals, weddings, parent-child dedications, pastoral counseling, public witness, programming, and worship leadership. Two guest ministers from the greater Kansas City area filled Community's pulpit during Hill's absence.

Hill reports that the sabbatical experience was good for pastor and congregation alike. "Besides exciting venues and encounters with new experiences, the renewal program provided Community and me a time for in-depth, refreshing reflection on the theme of diversity. Without the pressures of regular responsibilities, as well as phone, fax, and e-mail, and emergency duties, I was freed to ponder deeply the words of poet E.A. Robinson: 'The world is... a kind of spiritual kindergarten where millions of bewildered infants are trying to spell God with the wrong blocks.' After the sabbatical the congregation noted that I had returned to community's embrace with greater vitality than
ever before and with a refined sense of what it takes for a congregation to be authentically, excitingly, and joyfully diverse.”

For pastors considering a sabbatical, Hill has a few words of advice. First, he says that the pastor should plan for a significant “welcome home” event, with a series of update meetings with congregation and staff immediately after return. And, regarding taking a sabbatical, Hill says, “Do it and do it at regular agreed upon intervals.”

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Jeff Neevel, pastor of the Reformed Church of the Thousand Isles in Alexandria Bay, New York, recognizes three rivers as shaping his life and ministry. He credits the Amazon, the Hudson, and the St. Lawrence as providing the theme for his three-month sabbatical. By spending time close to each river he searched out how these bodies of water “give life to the culture, ecology, history, economy and faith history of each area they touch.”

Neevel, accompanied by his wife and nine-year-old son, spent eight days cruising 325 miles of the Amazon in the company of experienced anthropologists and nature guides. Hiking, canoeing, night walks, fishing and swimming helped the family to experience all that the river and its lush rainforest has to provide. That experience was followed by an eight-day trip to Machu Picchu and Cuzco. Neevel says that his son had recently “been turned on by the study of tropical rainforests and wildlife in school,” and thus the trip was an open book for him and provided a “wonderful opportunity for me to reconnect with him as a father—a role the ministry has seriously compromised.”

Following the Amazon experience, the Neevels returned to the States and journeyed throughout the Hudson Valley, beginning with a visit to his parents in Clifton Park near Albany and worshiping at the church where his father was serving as interim pastor. By visiting several Reformed churches that dot the Hudson valley, the Neevels were able to reconnect with places where his grandfather and great-grandfather were ministers. Following that, the family went to Brockville, Ontario, and boarded a rental houseboat for four weeks exploring St. Lawrence river communities in New York and Canada. That part of the trip allowed Neevel ample time for reading, writing, processing previous experiences, and savoring the opportunity of “just being a family together again.”

Preparation among Neevel’s congregation members was an important part of the planning process. Congregation members expressed expectations that they would be challenged during their pastor’s absence but that they would also be empowered to...
grow in faith as a result of rising to that challenge. In words expressed before the sabbatical, members of the congregation wrote, “We expect our church family to strengthen bonds as together we share in this journey of faith and discovery with Jeff and his family. We expect Jeff and our church to strike a healthier balance between what he does as our Pastor and what we do as members of his flock. We expect this sabbatical journey to help further our own church’s mission to ‘know Christ and to make Christ known.’” The congregation planned both a send-off celebration and a welcome-home event that included a flotilla of boats filled with friends and family honoring their return and guiding them home. Neevel and his family were surprised upon their return to find the parsonage renovated with a new kitchen and bathroom.

Neevel summarizes the experience in a number of ways. “I was able to recharge and refocus and envision new ministry in the Bay…I grew closer to my family…I also fell more in love with the church and the people who made this possible, supported us through it, and now share in the joy of our experiences…I grew more confident in some of my abilities. Conquering the Amazon, climbing Macchu Picchu, and successfully navigating a sometimes treacherous river in a 40-foot houseboat were just some of the personal accomplishments which allowed me to come away with a greater feeling of life achievement.” He notes, however, that he was surprised how quickly life returned to normal after coming home and that many members of his congregation waited until his return to take care of problems. “It was the same as when we go away for a week’s vacation, only now it was 12 times worse!” Nevertheless, he reports that “I’m not sure I would have done anything differently.”

The Rev. Dr. Vanessa Allen-Brown is pastor of York Street United Methodist Church in Cincinnati, Ohio. Her sabbatical came after serving her congregation for ten years. She too chose to travel during her three-month time away, with the hope on focusing on God’s beauty in creation.

Allen-Brown chose to visit three countries with her children, son Darien, 20, and daughter Kayla, 6. She picked Australia first because it is perhaps the oldest land formation in the world and home to the oldest people. Then she visited South Africa for the beauty of country, the people, and the majestic animals. While there she and her children visited an informal village in Soweto. She remembers that she was “deeply touched by children’s reaction to what they saw and felt. Kayla, my eight-year old, was not ready to leave the children she met. There were no video games/game boys or mp3s. There were dirt streets, portable toilets, and shanties. Yet she was not ready to leave her playmates and their homes. The same environment humbled my 20-year-old son as he questioned his life goals.” Allen-Brown has another memory of a school that was housed in shipping crates. The school had
500 students and only 10 staff members, including the principal, teachers, custodians, and cook.

Allen-Brown and her children also visited Egypt, the cradle of civilization and the site of the extraordinary Sahara desert. In Egypt, she says, “The pyramids, the sphinx, cruising down the Nile, the Valley of the Kings—all touched me in ways that would take hours to explain. And as I fell in love with the people of Egypt, my soul reconnected with my spiritual homeland.” Finally she returned to North Carolina, to the place of her birth and the beautiful Atlantic coast.

The members of York Street United Methodist church were involved in the early planning of Allen-Brown’s sabbatical and a morning worship was dedicated to a presentation of the countries she and her family would visit. After a bon voyage lunch, weekly services and congregational responsibilities were carried out by the assistant pastor.

Upon returning to the pulpit following sabbatical, Allen-Brown knows that her sermons “were more vibrant, bold, and challenging.” And when asked if there was a change toward her on the part of congregants, she replied that she did not notice much. “It was more of ‘you’re back, get to work.’” What advice might she have for other pastors contemplating a sabbatical? “Dream, dream, dream,” she says, “I invite them to seek out the things that make their heart sing and dance. I invite them to reconnect with their calling to ministry and to God’s people. Go for it!”

Rev. Dean L. Francis, after seven years as senior pastor of the First United Methodist Church in Evanston, IL, used his three-month sabbatical to pursue a long time interest in food and its relationship to Christian community. To do this he spent the first two months attending the professional culinary degree classes at Kendall College in Evanston, taking the introductory courses that every chef would take to learn how to cook professionally. The last month, accompanied by his wife, Francis spent traveling to taste the food of France and Italy.

Learning a completely new and different discipline and “having time to completely disengage from the ministry and spending quality and extended time with my wife” were highlights of the sabbatical experience for Francis. His only caveat for others planning a sabbatical is not to try to fit too much into the time away and build in time for rest and “simply hanging out.” He says it is important for persons taking a sabbatical to follow their dream, their passion and to “bring it to life with the gift of time that you receive.”
Francis believes that his congregation is a bit more understanding of the pressures of ministry since he had his sabbatical leave. To take care of things during his absence, the personnel committee formed a Renewal Leave Committee to help him plan his leave and to attend to coverage. The congregation voted on the plan and “gave us a send off reception on our last Sunday.”

In addition to congregational understanding of ministerial pressures, Francis reports that the members have been “very interested in my cooking and that has been good and bad. I didn’t want to become the church chef and to some degree I have cooked more than I expected for the congregation.”

Across the country, in San Francisco, pastor Calvin Chinn of the Presbyterian Church in Chinatown went on sabbatical after thirteen years in that ministry. Renewal was the key motivator for his experiences of study and reflection and for the time spent rooting himself and his family in Chinese language, culture, and ancestry as well as touring sites that equip lay leaders for urban ministry.

Over a four-month period Chinn used a few weeks for rest and for reading and study and practicing tai chi. He made consultation visits to the Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education in Chicago, New York Theological Seminary, the Center for Urban Ministerial Education in Boston, and the Center for Urban Theological Studies in Philadelphia. These visits affirmed his vision of “equipping and empowering the laity for ministry.”

Due to the 2003 SARS outbreak in Asia, Francis and his family delayed their family roots trip to China by a year, something he says was a blessing in disguise because it allowed him more time for rest, reading, reflection, prayer, and tai chi, all helpful to him as he went through a personal time of struggle with his own identity. The experiences helped him. He says that “I regained my identity and meaning in life. For I am a child of God. I am not defined nor valued nor measured nor approved for what I do or for what I own, or for what I accomplish. Because I am a child of God, I can live with doubt, with uncertainty, with powerlessness, with no control. I belong to God.”

Francis advises pastors who take sabbaticals to plan ahead so that the congregation is involved and “takes ownership early on.” He encourages long range strategic planning in advance so that the results and outcomes from the planning are incorporated into the sabbatical purpose and plans. He notes that because of the sabbatical there is a genuine sense of mutual interdependency between him and his congregation. “The congregation missed me and I missed the congregation. But we experienced a renewal which would not have happened without the time apart. Both the congregation and I
have discovered that who we are and what we do are not about us. In the beginning, in the present, in the end—it is all about God.”

Travel was also an important part of the renewal process engaged in by The Rev. Jonathan Schofield Hutchison, Vicar of St. David’s Episcopal Church in Bean Blossom, IN. Hutchison acknowledges that he was surprised when his sabbatical began “how exhausted I was at the outset and how long it took to recover.” With his wife of 25 years, he spent four weeks in an Irish farmhouse on the Dingle Peninsula, “resting, reading, writing poetry, journaling, hiking, mountain climbing, visiting ancient Christian and pre-Christian sites, and taking in traditional and contemporary Irish culture. Toward the end of the stay he took a poetry writing intensive with an Irish poet-publisher.

After decompressing in Ireland Hutchison and his wife traveled through England, Scotland and Wales, engaging in cultural and writing activities and visiting major cathedrals and pilgrimage spots. They also made brief retreats on the islands of Lindesfarne and Iona. Returning to the U.S., they went to the mountains of northern New Mexico for visits with family and friends and more writing workshops and a conference.

Parish leadership was involved from the beginning of Hutchison’s sabbatical planning. They educated themselves about clergy sabbaticals and helped prepare for increased responsibilities and the “overt and subtle effects of the pastor’s extended absence.” He notes that his absence had the effect of nudging the congregation “to take additional and more dramatic steps toward a more independent, empowered style. They learned ‘there’s a lot we can do for ourselves.’” He says one of his most significant learnings was the discrepancy between “my own idealized philosophy of shared ministry, consultation and delegation and my actual practice of these ideals. With this realization came the understanding that more mindful practice would lead to more effective ministry and enhanced personal and congregational health…One legacy from the sabbatical time has been the ongoing conscious commitment by parish leaders to hold my feet to that particular fire. Having survived my absence with ease, my presence is now viewed more realistically, with lesser clericalism and greater appreciation.”

All of the pastors queried for this article stressed the need for balance in dedicated time for rest, relationships, prayer, and renewal. Hutchison puts it this way, “Be realistic about the sheer volume of books you expect to read, projects you intend to complete, novels you propose to write or instruments you hope to learn.” And for those contemplating a sabbatical, San Francisco’s Chinn sums it up well: “It is so important for the sabbatical to exhibit coherence—where the character of the congregation, the personal and professional needs of the pastor, the proposed activities and budget, and
the shape of the planning process come together in a way that makes sense and indicates a meaningful and efficacious renewal experience. When there is coherence, you can almost guarantee that the sabbatical will serve to renew both the pastor and the congregation.