



LUTHERAN  
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

# Pastor's Update

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

"Grace and peace to you from the God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Senior Pastor Mike Housholder is embarking on a sabbatical later this month. After fourteen intensive and even frenetic years at Lutheran Church of Hope, such a break is much overdue. We all deeply hope that Mike, Sally and family can disengage from all of the accelerating demands and pressures of pastoral ministry. To find time to engage with God, with one another and with God's majestic world. We will miss him, but we hope he does not miss us too much, or he will not experience the separation which is part and parcel of a successful sabbatical.

For those who might be curious about the origins of the sabbatical, we need to look no further than in the Bible. Right away in the second chapter of Genesis we find the passage, *By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all of his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all of the work of creating he had done.*

Thus arose the Sabbath day, when all followers of God were to "rest from all of the work of creating," or whatever else they were doing. In fact, the word "Sabbath" means to rest, to stop, to quit doing whatever we have been doing, to take a break from the routines and protocols which dominate our life. It means to stop "doing" and learn once again how to just "be."

In addition, the biblical intention for a Sabbath is that it would provide time and opportunity for us to be more open to the Spirit of God, to slow down enough so that we can listen to the voice of God within. This most often happens when we worship, pray, sing, experience solitude, and touch the life of someone in need. "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy," reflects this historical emphasis.

Implicit and explicit in God's observance of a seventh day of rest is that if God can do this, then we are never too important or too busy to do the same. As one kindly parishioner once reminded me, "Pastor,

every time I think I am indispensable I take a drive out around the cemetery." Hello!

The reason given for a Sabbath in the book of Deuteronomy is that the people of Israel who were captive in Egypt for some four hundred years never had a break. In all that time, no day off, no rest, no Sabbath. The consequence of these oppressions were that they were no longer living as God intended, but rather had become slaves, only work units, known only by what they did—making bricks and constructing pyramids.

Early in the Bible the observation of the Sabbath quickly ramped up to the concept of sabbatical. Listen to Exodus 23, *For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what they leave. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove.*

The book of Leviticus applies this same admonition to the Promised Land, *When you come to the land I am giving you, the land must be given a rest period, a Sabbath to God. For six years you may plant your fields, prune your vineyards and harvest your crops, but the seventh year is Sabbath of Sabbath for the land.* Not surprisingly, an agrarian society manifested the sabbatical first in the use of the land.

I am not sure when the sabbatical moved from property to persons, but it most likely originated in academic circles, where such institutions discovered that scholars and teachers became more effective if they had a sabbatical every seven years. Not only was this a time for many of them to do research, or write books, or travel, but it was a time to disengage, to stop doing what they were doing and have time for renewal and refreshment. The general consensus soon formed that renewed and rested teachers were more productive and creative than those who were exhausted.

In our modern period, of course, the awarding of a sabbatical is deeply entrenched in most institutions of higher learning, most specifically in colleges, universities and seminaries. Our daughter is a professor at Hamline University in St. Paul and is now anxiously awaiting her second sabbatical in a couple of years. She used her first such year as a time to complete the writing of a book.

Congregations came rather late to the table of the sabbatical, most likely because most churches have only one pastor, and it has not been easy to find someone to fill-in, or to pay for additional pastoral services. I rarely heard of pastors on sabbatical when I began my ministry in 1967. But now it is a fact that every synod in the ELCA and most other major denominations recommends that every pastor be given a sabbatical leave approximately every four or five years, with up to three months duration.

One of the occupational hazards of being a pastor is many never experience a "Sabbath." The Sabbath is a work day for most pastors. Unfortunately, many of them do the same thing on sabbatical, doing just more of the same of what they do the rest of the time. They create a new sermon series, or read a gaggle of books on church organization or vision, or go to seminars on church leadership. The agenda remains the same, only the location changes.

But Sabbath or sabbatical means to stop, stop whatever one has been doing, to take a complete break, to find creative and enterprising ways of resting, renewing and being revitalized. Very often the best thing to do is to do something completely different, which has nothing at all to do with pastoral ministry. During my last sabbatical, my wife Jackie was doing a project on women in American history for her own teaching, so I enthusiastically joined in this search for information, helping to scour bookstores, libraries, historical sites and museums all up and down New England. I think after a few weeks I was finally able to disengaged from the 24/7 preoccupation I had with my profession.

What makes sabbaticals so crucial for clergy is that studies overwhelming demonstrate how clergy are under increasing stress and pressure. Such forces affect not only clergy, of course, but there is ample evidence that we have moved in just one short generation, as Loren Mead writes, from "high status-low stress" to "high stress-low status." No wonder so

many clergy are dropping out, and significantly fewer are getting in in the first place.

Also as Roy Oswald from the Alban Institute points out in his book Clergy Self-Care, stress is cumulative. Those who are in long pastorates, more than ten years, are much more likely to be stressed or "dis-stressed" than those of shorter tenure. Oswald recommends very strongly that every pastor work no more than fifty hours a week and takes two consecutive days off each week. (When I read this I wondered on which planet he had been living.) Most pastors have only one day off per week, and that often disappears with the latest crisis.

But Oswald says that we pay a price for stress, and thus the argument for regular sabbaticals. Workaholic clergy often suffer one of three consequences, or perhaps more than one. First, their bodies deteriorate because there is not enough time to rest, exercise or eat properly. (The numbers of overweight, overwrought and unhealthy clergy is alarmingly high).

Secondly, their relational life suffers because there is not sufficient time to have quality time with loved ones. Divorce and family breakdown are now serious issues among clergy. And then thirdly, their spiritual life atrophies because there is not enough time to read, journal, walk, think, and pray. So Oswald concludes that it is in the congregation's self interest, much like the academic institutions mentioned earlier, to make sure that their leader stays healthy: physically, relationally, emotionally, and spiritually.

So Pastor Mike will be gone. That means that he will really be gone, not just a few blocks away. This means no phone calls, no e-mails, no blackberries, no mail. No contact, period. Mike and Sally and whichever children are along can be happily ensconced in a motor home or cabin or hideaway.

Pray that Pastor Mike will truly find renewal, refreshment and revitalization. One of the highest priorities for Lutheran Church of Hope, obviously, is to help keep Pastor Mike healthy and productive, for he has had such an incredibly positive impact on Hope, the larger community and the wider church.

Thank God for sabbaticals.