

Thoughts after my sabbatical from youth ministry

I think in retrospect I worked too much! So I spent a month in Australia and NZ with my family. Sometimes my ministry affects them negatively, so that holiday with great family time - game playing, no stress etc was restful. Church blessed me with a large sum of money to go towards sabbatical costs. One of our church wardens (elders) said to me beforehand that I needed to rest so it was great to have that permission.

When I came back I spent nine weeks Monday to Friday 9-3 in the local library writing a book on youth ministry which I've now published (Raising the Bar: Nearly Everything You Need to Know about Christian Youth Ministry available at www.churchyouthministry.com). That was useful thinking time, but still meant I could drop children off and pick them up from school and not have any evening meetings!! I visited some big churches nationally, generally on Fridays or Sundays, to see what they were doing we could learn from (but not every weekend) and visited some local churches in my home city which I never normally get the chance to visit. I tried to combine longer trips with family visits to different people if possible. My family tended to keep going to our own church.

My learnings I'd love to pass on to you are:

1. I do think if you've been in ministry a long time (I've been in 20 years!), that 3 months is the right amount of time. Two wouldn't have been enough for me.
2. Think carefully before you get the time off how you're going to use it. Don't waste the first week thinking, 'What should I do now?' I should have spent more time planning my book before having the time to write it... I took another five years to publish it!
3. Before you start, get church to think through what they want from you when you come back - what are they expecting you to bring back. I feel I just fell back into things, without even doing a report to PCC or anything!
4. Get someone else to sort your emails/messages. Pull out of the church youth social media for the sabbatical and don't get emails sent to your phone any more. A couple of times people texted me not realising I was on sabbatical so I just sent their text on to someone else to deal with.
5. Prepare your team (if you have one) for you leaving. Church knew I was taking the sabbatical over a year before I took it, so we built a good team. Rather than being me plus ministry assistants as we were five years before, we'd adapted to be me plus 14-18s minister, 11-14s minister, 6-10s minister and 0-5s minister. When I left, the 0-5s

minister took on an oversight role, but everyone basically kept doing what they were doing! We've got a big staff team so this is easier. If it's mostly you, now's a good time to start preparing for it by letting go and training people up!

6. Prepare your youth for you leaving. I had a useful word with the youth group (the most likely people to call me) a couple of weeks before I left to say, 'I love you but I'm not going to contact you for the next three months and please don't try to contact me. To give you an idea what it's like to be my child, one of them said to me the other day, 'Will you always have meetings...?' so for these three months I'm not available....' That seemed to work.
7. It worked really well doing a holiday first. I was doing work in schools on Thursday morning and I flew out Thursday night! That way it's a clean break and difficult to think about work. If people don't know you're on sabbatical, they can't get you anyway.
8. Keep disciplined. It was really important for me to keep getting up in the morning. I was probably better disciplined on sabbatical than I am normally.
9. Timetable quiet reflective times, especially if like me you're an activist. My best day was a half day in a park praying, journalling, reading the Bible - I wish I'd had some more of those.
10. Think big thoughts about your ministry. Where is God calling you as an individual? Youth ministry? Where is God taking youth ministry nationally? Someone told me to spend time thinking where God had taken me so far in youth ministry and where he was taking me in the future, which was quite helpful. I've got a document that might help you to take stock, asking questions like, 'What is it too late for?'
11. Journal. What is God teaching you? What passages are particularly important now?
12. Don't work too hard. I didn't take enough time doing things around the house. So I got back to work and the kitchen still needed a refit, the wardrobe runners still didn't run smoothly etc. I finished a first draft of my book, but still... If I was to start over, I'd do 1 month holiday. 1 week home stuff. 6 weeks whatever. 1 week getting my thoughts in order. Or maybe just one day a week of home stuff.
13. Do all of the things you don't normally have enough time or energy for: visit friends, play games, go dancing (whatever is your thing!), have everyone in your life round for dinner. If there are things that you can't normally do because they clash with church things, do them all! So if you've always wanted to run a marathon but they're always on Sunday, run a marathon!! I wish I'd done that... or maybe not!
14. If you talk to someone from church, or a youth from the group, never ask, 'How are things at church?' I was really careful about that. If ever I met a teenager I knew, I'd

say something like, 'How are you? (but don't tell me how the youth group is - it's not that I don't care, but it's best for me if I don't know).'

15. Read! I didn't do enough of this!

16. Finish any stuff you're doing a week before you go back to work to give you time to write down your learnings. People will ask you what you learnt to bring back to the church and you need to be able to answer that. Once you're back to work, it's harder to find that place again...

17. **The hardest point** - Don't pick up things straightaway. They've probably managed fine without you there, so leave things be. Don't expect just to take things back over. Work out what's working fine and where you now need to put in energy and time going forward. Otherwise you may find people leave feeling unappreciated. Church has moved on without you, and you need to recognise that and work out your new place.

I'm happy to think some more, so do ask some more questions! Do send me an email if you want.

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