

WHEN YOUR PREACHER LEAVES: Interim Services for Churches Between Ministers

Newsletter, August, 2007, #14

“Come Aside...and Rest Awhile”:

A Preacher’s Sabbatical, by Jerrie W. Barber

The following article is one I wrote about the sabbatical I took in the summer of 2000. It is the best “preacher gift” I have ever been given. The article appeared in the *Gospel Advocate*, March, 2004, page 20. I appreciate Neil Anderson for giving me permission to reprint it here.

I have been thankful for the words of Jesus in Mark 6 for many years. “Then the apostles gathered to Jesus and told Him all things, both what they had done and what they had taught. And He said to them, ‘Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.’ For there were many coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.” (Mark 6:30, 31, NKJV). That passage along with verses 45 and 46 are my encouragement for Sunday afternoon naps.

Since the spring of 1984, I have been aware that I would like to have more than a Sunday afternoon nap and a week’s vacation. My elders and I began to discuss a three-month sabbatical in the spring of 1998 with the possibility of me being off the summer of 2000. We continued to pray and plan. This was the most helpful gift I have been given in my forty years of preaching.

I had three meetings already scheduled for the summer: one in each month, and one speech at Freed-Hardeman University during the twenty-fifth Christian Training Series. The elders asked me not to accept any additional speaking engagements.

The summer consisted of traveling with my family, resting, and studying. One of my personal growing experiences of the summer was a week in seclusion. I rented a rustic cabin at Natchez Trace State Park. Leaving home on Friday afternoon, I did not turn on a radio, tape player, or TV until I returned the following Friday. After rising at 6:00 each morning, I walked a few miles and was reading and studying by 8:00 a.m. This continued until about 6:30 p.m. each day. I then took books to a bench beside the lake and read until it was too dark to read. While sitting there, I watched the Big Dipper come out and then retreated to the cabin to read until 10:00 PM. I rose the next morning and started again.

One of the delightful opportunities during my extended time off was the congregations we visited. Do you ever get tired of hearing the same preacher preach Sunday after Sunday? If you do, you can visit. I had been listening to the same preacher for thirty-nine years and I enjoyed the break. We worshipped and studied with thirty different congregations.

The work at Berry’s Chapel continued in a great way during my absence. There were baptisms, restorations, people placing membership, and good attendance. Early in the summer the congregation had the opportunity to purchase a house and an acre of land adjoining our property. After a Family Meeting, the elders decided to take advantage of that. There was a one-Sunday contribution of more than \$90,000.00 to pay on the property and the balance was paid during the year.

According to our plans, the elders and I stayed in touch by meeting once a month. We kept each other informed on how the congregation and our families were doing during the summer.

Observations on the Summer

The rest and break were valuable. I averaged eight hours of sleep per night for June, July, and August. Back and sciatic pains were nonexistent.

I enjoyed being unorganized during the summer.

I would not want to do what I did this summer continually. I am more convinced that I don't want to retire but to change directions in a few years.

I like to be organized: to-do lists, time to get up, responsibilities.

I was able to study in general: reading, memory work, forty sermons started on my computer.

I looked forward to coming back. The time seemed just right.

I think I have experienced an alternative to burnout or moving, which is often from overload without seeing an alternative. It is my observation that many preachers move because they see no other way for relief and renewal. It is harder to preach for a congregation the longer a preacher stays. Old sermons are depleted. More activities and tasks are accepted. There is less time to do more. The break is a way to start over.

It is my observation that often members go to another congregation for similar reasons. They are active and take on more jobs. They do not know how to resign or rest without guilt. The only way they know how to get relief is to relocate and start over. I believe there is another alternative – take a break.

Some things that helped the summer work well for me and for the church were:

- Planning. We talked for two years before the sabbatical. A general announcement was made to the congregation in January. The elders read a detailed letter at a Family Meeting in April with questions and answers following.
- Repeated communication about what I would and would not do. Some thought this was my time to find another congregation and that I would resign at the end of the summer or that the church was ready to look for another preacher. The elders and I made a commitment that neither of us would even discuss the possibility of a change in the working relationship for two years. It was interesting that I received two of the most attractive and challenging approaches in years to consider moving soon after we made this agreement.
- Consistent and quality preachers at Berry's Chapel while I was gone. John Parker and Jim Bill McInteer delivered masterful sermons during the summer. The general comments that I received on returning were, "We missed you, but we had a wonderful summer!"
- Good leadership in the congregation. Our elders, a fellow deacon, youth minister, and secretary handled some extra tasks and for them I am grateful.

I enjoyed visiting other congregations and telling them of the love and generosity of the Berry's Chapel congregation in giving me this time for rest and renewal. There was a pattern. As I introduced myself as a preacher, I would be asked, "What are you doing here, vacation?"

I would reply, "The elders and congregation gave me a three-month sabbatical – June, July, and August."

Especially if I were talking to an elder, the next comment would be, “With pay?” To which I would respond, “Yes. In the Old Testament, the dirt got to rest once every seven years. I believe I am more valuable than dirt” (Leviticus 25:1-5). At one of the congregations, an elder said, “We have been trying to get our preacher to take off like that for years and he won’t do it.” Most preachers thought it was a great gift, but some expressed apprehension that they might lose their job while they were gone if they took off.

I am working on this manuscript at the end of a week in seclusion – much like the one I had last summer. I preached Sunday, arrived in Fairfield Glade Sunday night, and have spent an intensive week in study. It is thrilling to have five days of uninterrupted time to read, study, think, and put sermon ideas on the computer that have been in a cardboard box from one to twenty years. I hope to continue this in the future. This is not a “vacation.” I worked thirteen hours a day, only leaving the room once each day.

I appreciate my elders: Dennis Crowder, Ron Gambill, Dennis Makins, and Mike Norwood, along with the Berry’s Chapel congregation for permitting me to recharge, renew, and continue to prepare to work. I look forward to times of worship, my time at the church building, service opportunities, and elder’s meetings. I truly believe that our time apart has kept us together.

Shakespeare Quotations for Ministers, by John Parker

The course of true love never did run smooth.
True love will have its problems.
A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM 1.1

How happy some o’r other some can be!
Some people are much more happy than others, seemingly unfairly.

He will not know what all but he do know.
Sometimes a person refuses to recognize what all others do.
A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM 1.1

Things base and vile, holding no quantity,
Love can transpose to form and dignity.
One in love looks at something ugly and imagines it beautiful.
A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM 1.1

Smile of the Month

This puny guy applies for a job as a lumberjack.
“Sorry,” says the head lumberjack, eyeing the man up and down, “you’re just too small.”
“Give me a chance to show you what I can do.” The guy pleads. “You won’t regret it.”

“Okay,” says the boss. “See that giant oak over there? Let’s see you chop it down.”

Half an hour later, the mighty oak is felled, amazing the boss. “Where’d you learn to cut trees like that?” he asks. “The Sahara Forest.”

“You mean the Sahara Desert?”

“Sure, if that’s what they call it now” (“Laughter, The Best Medicine”, *Reader’s Digest*, February 2004, page 146).

Mustard Seeds from Favorite Books, Jerrie Barber

Choosing a New Pastor, the Complete Handbook, by Henry A. Virkler, PhD.,
Copyright © 1992.

When choosing a new pastor, some denominations and congregations rarely take time to reflect on their past. As a result they may repeat the problems with a new pastor that they have had with former pastors. Other congregations and denominations do not feel they have done an adequate job of preparing for a new pastor if they have not looked carefully at their past (particularly if there were problems between the pastor and the congregation) and have come to an understanding of how and why those problems developed (page 3).

One mistake that PNCs (pastor nominating committees) frequently make is the failure from the outset to adopt an explicit code of confidentiality. Such a code should include confidentiality about the identity of applicants the committee is considering, the status of any particular applicant, and the specific reasons for disqualifying a candidate. Adopting such a code has several advantages:

- It protects the ministries of persons the committee is considering.
- It does not allow the congregation to campaign for any specific applicant.
- It does not cause unnecessary anxiety for the present congregations of applicants, some of whom will never even become serious candidates (many committees screen fifty applicants before reaching their final decision; there is no need for all fifty churches to worry about losing the pastor when most of their pastors will not reach the final selection process).
- It protects the self-esteem of applicants the committee does not select (it’s hard enough to be rejected by a committee; it’s much harder to know that this rejection is public knowledge) (page 38).

There is probably a psychological resistance to checking out the references for someone who might become our pastor. As Christians, most of us want to believe the best about others, particularly others in ministry. We may have to overcome some natural antipathy to do a good job here. Most people that applicants list as references do not want to tell bad things about their friend or associate, so they probably won’t unless we ask specific and pointed questions. Thorough background checking also involves *checking with people other than those an applicant has listed in his resume*. My interviews also said that PNCs should check credit history and determine if an applicant has a criminal record (pages 43, 44).

Loren Mead says in this regard:

Saying “good-bye” is terribly important; too many pastors are self-centered at this point, refusing to let people have parties and occasions for saying good-bye, acting as if the celebrations were for the person of the departing pastor. No way. They are important moments for potential ministry on the part of pastors who are leaving, moments that may make the difference between freeing people for the future or tying them to one’s apron string for years to come (Loren B. Mead, *Critical Moment of Ministry: A Change of Pastors*, Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1986, 72) (page 69).

Barber Clippings

Jerrie Barber

Our work continues to go well here. We are beginning gathering information for our self-study. We will have a Family Meeting Sunday night where we will discuss this and other things that have to do with this congregation. I enjoyed a meeting with the Upper Sinking congregation in Hickman County, Tennessee. It was a six-day meeting: Sunday – Friday. They had good participation from the congregation, sister churches, and the community. We had a children’s class each night with thirteen young people participating. I will be with the Bethel congregation in Joelton, Tennessee, September 9-12. If you are interested in the lessons we are studying with the elders, deacons, and wives at Eddyville, they are posted as we study them on my blog:

<http://barberclippings.blogspot.com/>

barberclippings@comcast.net

www.barberclippings.com

(615) 356-8371

P. O. Box 630

Eddyville, Kentucky 42038

Church phone: 270-388-7948

Home phone: 270-388-8278

Cell phone: 615-584-0512

Dr. Paul Seawright and I spent two weeks traveling in England photographing and researching sites where some of the great hymns were composed. Among our visits was Olney, home of John Newton (“Amazing Grace”); Charles Wesley (“Hark, the Herald Angels Sing”); Soldiers of Christ Arise”); Charlotte Elliott (“Just as I Am”); and Reginald Heber (“Holy, Holy, Holy”), and many others which I will report on later. I am developing a Power Point series of lessons of the hymns, their composers, and the sites.

John H. Parker

Johnparker22@aol.com

www.interimcofc.com

(615) 373-4462