

# initiative for *ministerial excellence*

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## Ideas for Using Sabbaticals

- Visit other congregations that seem to be successful in a ministry your church needs to develop. (e.g. worship; reaching new people; leadership development; mission)
- Travel to holy sites and cities where figures from church history lived and ministered. Consider trips to: the Holy Land, Rome, Ireland, Scotland, England, and Switzerland.
- Attend conferences for personal spiritual development as well as leadership development. Organizations such as the Center for Congregational Health, Alban Institute, Leadership Network, and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship all sponsor such events.
- Participate in a mission trip, possibly combined with a pilgrimage or retreat.
- Begin a journal, recording daily meditations and reflections or notes from reading.
- Engage a mentor for reflection and guidance.
- Develop a reading plan. Consider beginning with these resources:
  - Robert E. Friedrich, Jr., Discerning Your Congregation's Future (Alban, 1996)
  - Richard Bullock & Richard J. Bruesehoff, Clergy Renewal: The Alban Guide To Sabbatical Planning (Alban, 2000)
  - Melissa Bane Sevier, Journeying Toward Renewal: A Spiritual Companion for Pastoral Sabbaticals (Alban, 2002)
- Plan a sabbatical around three blocks suggested by Bullock (above resource, p. 19)
  - Resting—sleeping late, exercise, recreational reading, visiting friends and family, hiking, engaging a counselor
  - Renewal—focused study, retreats
  - Rebirth—travel, focused reading, engaging a spiritual director
- Begin a D.Min. or other degree program at a partner divinity school, seminary or university.

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## “Life After Sabbatical”

By James E. Lamkin, Pastor  
Northside Drive Baptist Church  
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June 6, 2008

In 2005, during my ninth year as pastor of Northside Drive Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, I took a sabbatical. I spent two months in Africa, followed by a month of study in Oxford, England. (The latter leg was made possible by a grant from the Louisville Institute.) This rhythm of research and rest and reflection soaked my soul. I returned, renewed. Plus, I came back with more adventurous sabbatical stories than a missionary has slide-shows!

However, this article is not about my travel tales. Rather, since most of pastoral life is in Ordinary Time, the article will focus on post-sabbatical time and *how my functioning has changed* because of it. Honestly, what is different is not so much *what I do*, but rather *how I go about my life*. The changes are more personal than pragmatic. For instance, the filing system I meant to overhaul still is in disarray; but that is OK, I like my life better.

From the sabbatical, I brought home twenty daily mantras that address a few of the growing edges in my life. (Some of these will make cameo appearances in this article.) The first three remind me to focus on *being* more than *doing*. They are: 1) Enjoy God.<sup>1</sup> 2) Enjoy myself. 3) Be gracious and forgiving to myself.

Here is what I have noticed about my post-sabbatical time; but remember *your mileage—your experience—may vary!*

### First, “We’re in this together.”

Though this is an old cliché, it is true. I am now three years downstream from my sabbatical. In retrospect, I can own my weariness and reactivity. I was more irritated than I was aware in those pre-sabbatical years. Mountains and molehills began to look alike. Mantra #11: “Obsession with emotional processes can wither the soul.”

As I monitor my ministry, I am less willful (at least, on most days). The notion of willfulness comes out of Family Systems Theory. It shows up when we try to force two sides of an emotional triangle together—like trying to get the deacons to change their processes or like trying to make the church grow in a certain way.

Prophetic leadership necessarily creates a healthy tension between the vision of what could be and the reality of what is. However, this tension, plus constant stress, can atrophy into rigidity. Even small battles suddenly become life or death. Here is post-sabbatical mantra #12. It is a quotation from Rainer Maria Rilke: “When we win it’s with small things, and the triumph itself makes us small.”<sup>2</sup>

I am less “*either/or*” in my leadership these days. I am not sure how my sabbatical helped that happen; but getting off the treadmill of weekly production gave me time to pause—and to fall in love again. “We travel, initially, to lose ourselves,” says

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journalist Pico Iyer, “and we travel, next to find ourselves. We travel to open our hearts and eyes and learn more about the world than our newspapers will accommodate. We travel, in essence, to become young fools again—to slow time down and get taken in, and fall in love once more.”<sup>3</sup>

“...and fall in love once more.” That happened. I am more overt in telling the congregation, “I love you.” *Love* shows up more in conversation. CPE supervisor, Franklin Duncan, says this is not accidental. I go to him for monthly supervision. He has observed that I have difficulty allowing myself to be loved by the congregation. The good news is that it is less difficult post-sabbatical.

I returned with less need (notice I did not say “no need”) to fix the church, and with a greater capacity to love the church and be loved by the church.

It is clearer to me: We are in this adventure of being a congregation together.

### **Second, “In this together...but we’re not stuck-together.”**

Any pastor worth her or his salt is aware of the enmeshment that can evolve between pastors and parishes. Pastoral care mentor, Wayne Oates of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, would watch the annual wave of young men (this took place in the 1950’s and 60’s) arriving at the seminary’s steps. His comment would be, “Here they come, leaving one mother in search of another.”

Family Systems Theory uses the term “borrowing self” to describe this. When lack of differentiation occurs, leadership is comprised due to the enmeshment. Thus, an appropriate “connected distance” is desired. As Gibran the poet put it, “Let there be spaces in your togetherness.”<sup>4</sup>

Church members tell me that I am different following my sabbatical. They say I am happier. I think they are right; but appearing “happier” is a result of a deeper truth. Though this may be odd for a pastor to say, *I need the church less; therefore, I can love the church more.*<sup>5</sup> In the imagery of C.S. Lewis (*The Four Loves*) I’m freer to offer *gift love*, and less driven by *need love*. My preaching is freer. I am working less at “impression management” and more at awareness and expression.

Mantra #6: “Though I desire the affirmation of others, I am not as dependent upon it, for I have God’s affirmation.” Mantra #18: “We are called not to prove ourselves, but to express ourselves; and oh, what a difference there is between proving and expressing (William Sloan Coffin).”

The job of the pastor is to attend to the church as the church attends to its own processes. The cessation of activity which my sabbatical brought helped me separate from the church’s processes which were “in process” long before I arrived. I am more patient. I have more stamina to maintain the tension of vision. I have a clearer sense of role and self.

### **Third, Sabbath + Attitude = *Sabbatitude*.**

I know that sounds corny, but it works for me. A United Church of Christ minister/friend, Chris Graham, gifted me with that word *sabbatitude*.

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Anybody that has taken a sabbatical knows there is a recognizable shift. It is physical and emotional. Sabbatical time evokes calmness. Shoulders relax. The tyranny of time no longer calls the shots. Play emerges. Sabbath happens!

I define *sabbatititude* as *the ability of retaining the grace and freedom of sabbatical time while doing one's everyday work.*

What if you could keep that grace-filled way of being? Go back to the same work; but go back differently. For instance, what difference might it make to attend the next Church Council meeting with one's *sabbatititude* in place?

### **In conclusion...**

Here is a prayer that has served me well. It is attributed to a World War II U.S. Army Chaplain. "God, when we find ourselves in unfamiliar terrain, help us trust our maps. However, when we find that our maps don't match the terrain, *help us trust the terrain!* Amen."

These are anxious days, especially in churches. The terrain is changing and no one knows what form it will take on the far side of the tectonic shift. Anxiously, we clutch outdated maps.

These days call for a healthy dose of *sabbatititude*. My sabbatical helped me bring that home. It helped me find new maps. It helped me trust the terrain.

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<sup>1</sup>The Westminster Shorter Catechism says we are to "glorify God and enjoy [God] forever." I have a Ph.D. in working hard trying to glorify God; but not even a high school diploma in enjoying God.

<sup>2</sup>"When we win it's with small things, and the triumph itself makes us small." From Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Man Watching," *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, translated by Robert Bly.

<sup>3</sup>"Why We Travel," by travel writer Pico Iyer. The article appeared in Salon.com ([www.salon.com](http://www.salon.com)).

<sup>4</sup>Gibran, Kahlil, *The Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knoff), 15.

<sup>5</sup>This insight comes from my "family systems colleague" and friend, Rev. Betty Pugh, pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia. It is similar to a question she asked when I was anxious about a situation: "Could you care less, but give more?"

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## “Sabbatical As Fitting Room—A Pastoral Paradigm”

By James E. Lamkin, Pastor  
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December 16, 2006

### Introduction

The clothing store in my small hometown of Arcadia, Louisiana, had a mirror in which I could see myself sideways. This was a big deal to a kid. With three mirrors placed in a concave shape, arranged for a several-angle effect, I could see *me* from various perspectives at the same time.

As a kid, I called that phenomenon *incredible*. As a fifty-three year old, I call that *sabbatical*. (And yes, I'll own *terrifying*, as well!)

Sabbatical time is sequestered time—time set apart for rest and reflection and God. I do not see it as time to *accomplish* something for God. It is time to be *accompanied* by God. It is a time to regain perspective—to do as I did as a kid in the clothing store mirror—to see one's self sideways.

I was ordained when I was twenty years old—not an uncommon practice in the 1970's by Baptist churches in the south. I've been doing “vocational ministry” for thirty-three years. Now, in my early fifties, I am pausing for an “inventory time.” Last year, I took my first sabbatical. This came during my ninth year as pastor of Northside Drive Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia.

Sabbatical stories can border on romance. These exotic postcards from the edge can offer a break from the pedestrian ways the Holy Spirit seems to prefer in the spiritual building of our lives—such as daily prayer, reading the Psalms, and journaling. Sabbaticals can be the extreme sports of the spiritual path. They also can be the fodder for jealousy, since many parish ministers will never have an opportunity to take one.

Because of these factors, I will comment upon, but not dwell on, the activities of my sabbatical travels. Sabbatical leave is bigger than the itinerary. The action of taking a sabbatical is a significant *systemic event* in the life of the minister and the life of the congregation. Said another way, the approach of this article is *to use my sabbatical experience much like the angled mirrors in a fitting room. I will reflect upon “the fit” of my vocational calling thus far, and preview “alterations” for my pastoral pilgrimage ahead.* Perhaps my musings—especially about the sabbatical planning process—will assist other parish clergy *as they pay attention to the emotional processes* within the church.

What do I see in the fitting-room mirrors as I reflect on my sabbatical experiences? Three perceptions appear. I offer these, not just as themes that rise from several months away from the job; rather, I offer these as seminal pieces of my *credo*.

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They are both discoveries and directions in my life. First, *sabbaticals are sacramental*. Second, “*systems thinking*” offers perspective. Third, *only God gives salvation*.

### **Sabbaticals are sacramental.**

A sacrament is an action or object that mediates divine redemptive power. My Baptist tradition is not big on sacraments. It is God alone who saves and needs no help to jump the salvific spark—thank you very much.

However, I believe sabbaticals can save. I do not mean saving from burn-out or saving from acting-out. I mean that the action of observing the Sabbath is itself redemptive.

Sabbath keeping is a commandment. As the saying goes, “It’s not just a good idea, it’s the law.” However, nearly every parish minister I know is a serial violator of this commandment; and almost every church could be cited as an accomplice.

When a pastoral sabbatical does occur, it is a two-fold gift. The church gifts itself and the minister as it offers a sabbatical. Also, the minister gifts himself or herself and the church by receiving and taking the sabbatical. Together, this reciprocity of what is given and what is received makes for *one* salvific action. It is mutually life-giving—regardless of the sabbatical’s intriguing itinerary, regardless of the church’s hard-to-measure response. Both parties have done the right thing by confessing that the realm of God does not flourish within intense, co-dependent relationships. The minister’s leave-taking is a statement by both parties that the true life of the church is “out of their hands.” It is, in fact, in the hands of God.

The following is my description of the evolution of Northside Drive Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, (and my journey as their pastor) as we created the possibility, then lived into the reality, of a pastoral sabbatical leave. Again, I believe “choosing sabbatical” is a sacrament that transcends the content of the sabbatical for both clergy and parish. It affords the opportunity of putting the pastor/parish relationship in plain view.

### ***In the beginning (and before)...***

Though the church I pastor values academics, though our church historically has been filled with various ilk of clergy, and though we think of our church as progressive—we did not have a sabbatical leave policy. To the church’s credit and my insistence they generously provide for monthly pastoral supervision. I consult a CPE Supervisor/Pastoral Counselor who sees congregational dynamics from a Family Systems perspective. To him I bring case studies from my life and those of the parish.

To be invested in the emotional, professional health of the pastor is self-care for the congregation. I strongly suggest that every minister have a supervisor outside the church with whom he or she consults regularly, and that the church should fund this consultation. A Lone Ranger style of functioning is isolating and dangerous in today’s litigious world.

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The church did not have a sabbatical leave policy when I became the pastor in 1997. They said the idea was foreign to them and were unable to create and approve one before I came. However, as the prospective minister, I asked the Personnel Committee to put in writing a commitment to work toward creating and implementing one.

Yet, as each year passed, the issue continued to be unaddressed. The Personnel Committee's yearly triage of tasks tended to focus on the normal squeaky-wheel-issues of the staff/congregation interface. "The time was never right," said the committee, to lead the church toward creating a sabbatical leave policy.

When the time came, it was not without controversy. The church was in a visioning process (ever notice the similarity between *vision* and *division*?) and one of the tools was a multi-paged survey. Many of the narrative responses were staff-focused. Chronic anxiety became more visible and acute.

In the middle of this process, the sabbatical leave policy came up for a vote. I could see the emotional connection between the pastor's absence and the morale issue of "how are we doing as a church?" At one meeting a deacon said, "The boat is sinking and the captain is abandoning ship." I found such comments personally difficult to hear. Yet, through my supervisor's help, I could hear them as (at least) expressions of separation anxiety. Before the vote on the policy, a friend in the church came to beseech me to pull-the-plug on the process, noting that it would be relationally destructive for me and the church.

However, this arduous journey *toward* sabbatical was vital to the significance of the sabbatical. The policy eventually and arduously passed. Though it was controversial, to the church's credit, they stepped to the plate to make it happen. Retrospect reminds me that this was no small relational step.

### ***Ministry through Absence***

Part of my sabbatical was funded by a grant from the Louisville Institute. This did two things: 1) it subsidized a substantial piece of my leave, 2) it externally validated the benefits and possibilities of my intentions.

Louisville Institute grant recipients were required to attend a three day seminar on how-to-take-a-sabbatical. My expectations regarding this seminar were low. However, I could not have been more wrong! The *Sabbaticals for Dummies* (my title) retreat gave strategic advice. Bill Brosend and the other Louisville Institute presenters offered vital and practical pieces. For example: 1) Do something on the first day that marks your entrance into *sabbatical time*. 2) Start living the sabbatical disciplines/values you want to address right now; i.e., if you want to recommit to journaling, begin today. 3) Enjoy the activities of preparation. E.g.: delight in your travel preparations. Begin to live the freedom. 4) Be warned that two weeks before the sabbatical is over, you will wonder where all the time went and may even feel depressed. 5) Ask a non-anxious lay-leader to be the *contact-in-case-of-emergency* person; and define *emergency* as nothing less than the entire church building burning down!

All of the above was great advice and essential to the sacrament of the pastoral act of leave-taking. My experience would have been less-than-the-best, without this coaching.

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I have heard that Henri Nouwen spoke of the *necessity* of the minister's absence. For the minister to be always available, said he, is to give the wrong impression about God. To us, God does not always feel easily available and accessible. Thus, even pastoral distance is a loving teacher.

Publishing a tri-fold pamphlet describing the sabbatical was a seminal step in my leave-taking. This came out of a conversation with the "emergency contact lay-person." He was more anxious than I expected about being in-between the congregation and the pastor in defining what crisis is worthy of the pastor's notification? For instance, should I return for the funeral of a prominent member?

However, my "ah ha" from the conversation was that it was *my* job to define *myself* to the congregation about this issue. I did so in the pamphlet. I named both my gratitude for the sabbatical gift and my intention to live fully into the gift. In so doing, I named the emotional distance required to make this work. I noted that I only would be returning for a death in my own family.

The self-definition also was done playfully. The older members seemed to be the most anxious—particularly those who had asked me to conduct their funerals. An example of how I attempted to honor them and their anxiety—but at the same time hold lightly their angst—is what I said to one elderly saint: "I prayed that God would reveal to me the names of congregants who will die in the three months while I am gone." Then, I allowed a long pause to follow. "But," said I, "I am glad to report that, as far as I can tell, your name is not on the list!"

She chuckled. Of course, she then asked, "Well whose names are on the list?" I was ready and replied, "Oh...that? That is confidential information which I am duty-bound not share!" We punctuated the conversation with deep laughter, deep prayer, and a deepened relationship.

### ***Who manages the church's anxiety?***

The church's nervousness pooled around preaching, pastoral care, and administration. My position was that this was natural *and* that it was the church's job to manage their own anxiety. In other words, it was not the pastor's job. I also decided that whatever they chose to do *was their decision to make and I would live with it*. As my supervisor, Franklin Duncan, says, "The job of the pastor is to attend to the church *as the church attends* to its own processes."

Once again, the church stepped to the plate and delighted in their own resourcefulness. A designated member of the Personnel Committee designed a line-up of great preachers (including Fred Craddock and Tom Long) calling it a *Festival of Preaching*. I helped craft some general elements of the summer's worship services that highlighted "the preaching of the Word."

The church hired a former Associate Pastor to serve in a part-time capacity as the minister during the interim. Her foci would be pastoral care and administration.

I chose to trust the church to do what was best for them. By not being responsible for their interim-anxiety, by not attempting to manage the implications of their choices, and by my choice to work on my own insecurity/control issues, I felt more energy to delight in my sabbatical. Seemingly it was a win/win for both pastor and parish.

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## *Itinerary for Renewal*

Phil Cousineau said in *Pilgrimage: Adventures of the Spirit*: “All are journeys of renewal. As pilgrims we go back to find something we lost; we return to the source to be restored, rejuvenated, revived.”<sup>1</sup>

“We travel, initially, to lose ourselves,” says journalist Pico Iyer, “and we travel, next to find ourselves. We travel to open our hearts and eyes and learn more about the world than our newspapers will accommodate. We travel to bring what little we can, in our ignorance and knowledge, to those parts of the globe whose riches are differently dispersed. And we travel, in essence, to become young fools again—to slow time down and get taken in, and fall in love once more.”<sup>2</sup>

That’s it. *To slow time down...and fall in love once more.* That’s sabbatical. Like love can leave a marriage (even for a season) it can leave a pastorate. Subtle enmeshment between pastor and parish, removes the catalytic distance necessary for both pastoral and prophetic ministry.

Almost like an epiphany, it came to me that drinking deeply from the well of C.S. Lewis *and* traveling to Africa (the cradle of civilization) would fit perfectly the contours of my soul. I am part monk, part adventurer, part scholar, and part creator of imaginative worlds.

The Louisville Institute graciously helped finance the C.S. Lewis piece. At the tail-end of my sabbatical I hunkered-down in Oxford, England, to read Lewis, visit his haunts, and seek his muse. While doing so, I leaned into the name of my sabbatical, *The Three R’s: Reading, Writing, and Resting*. ‘Twas heaven.

The first part of the journey sent me to Zimbabwe where I stayed for a month with friends and read and listened and took long walks. I then traveled for three weeks to South Africa. Cooperative Baptist Missionaries hosted me in Johannesburg and Cape Towne. All awesome!

While in the fitting-room of sabbatical reflection, I pondered, “What approaches to ministry do I need to continue and what do I need to change?” Alterations are best measured when you can see from all directions. Over the months, I noted possible alterations in my journal. I divided the journal into three parts: 1) The daily log, 2) Sermon/article/ministry ideas, and 3) D.D. The D.D. stood for *Do Differently*. I kept a running list of the areas in my life I wanted to do differently. This ranged from how I manage my sermon resource file, to fun things to do around Atlanta, to partnering with my son on working on our family genogram, to more intentional time with my wife, Liz.

At the end of the sabbatical leave, I reviewed these daily notations from my reading, observations, and reflections. From these I extracted twenty seminal statements that addressed growing edges in my life. Since then, these have become a Daily Rule. I now pray them every day. Number one is: “Enjoy God.” Number three is: “Be gracious and forgiving to myself.”

There is more to say about these *mantras as markers for ministry*. I will do so at the end of the article.

**“Systems thinking” offers perspective.**

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*Well-Being and Excellence in Ministry*

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As I reflect upon my sabbatical, the second image seen in the fitting room mirror is: “*Systems thinking*” offers perspective and it is a discipline I intend to pursue.

Family Systems Theory is the largest idea I have come across as an adult. Seeing life through this lens has given me a healthier perspective on how I view myself and my ministry. It is a *conceptualization of the behavioral processes at work in relationships—with the emphasis, not on the individual pieces, but upon their position in the overall structure.*

My angst was high as I began a new pastorate in northern Virginia, in 1992. Suddenly, Ed Freidman’s book, *Generation to Generation*, moved from the out-of-reach top of my bookshelves, to my desktop. His case studies contained therein suddenly read like pages from last night’s diary. A fellow minister, Larry Mathews, became a mentor regarding systems theory; and a new way of seeing came my way.

I wrote an article about my “sojourn into systems” in the theological journal *Review and Expositor*. The article was entitled: *Systems Theory and Congregational Leadership: Leaves from an Alchemist’s Journal*.<sup>3</sup> Because the article in the *Review and Expositor* details my benefit from “systems thinking,” I will not further describe that here. However, the sabbatical process—from policy to preparation to implementation to reflection to reentry—reinforced the importance of the perspective of Family Systems Theory. I will provide three angles that illustrate the value I give this perspective.

**First, “systems thinking” keeps the big picture (and my position in it) in mind.** The following quotation is attributed to a World War II U.S. Army Chaplain. “God, when we find ourselves in unfamiliar terrain, help us trust our maps. However, when we find that our maps don’t match the terrain, *help us trust the terrain!*”

Humans collect maps—life maps. These maps are memories, hopes, feelings, world-views, theologies, politics, and politics. Yet, all maps are time-stamped. All maps are provincial. “Where you stand determines what you see,” said Robert McAfee Brown.<sup>4</sup>

Some maps are proven to be helpful and true. Others are discovered to be misleading and false. The process of maturity is a study in cartography.

These are anxious days. We have adapted our lives to the terrain of reactivity; and the terrain no longer matches our maps. Though ministers “seek to meet the needs of people,” more people are anxious with unmet needs.

Murray Bowen of Georgetown University postulated a theory of *societal regression*. Through it he sought to describe the stuck-togetherness forces and diminishing capacity for self-differentiation. If he was right, then church is part of (if not co-conspirator in) this cul-de-sac of emotional process.

Multiple models for “ministry communities” abound, from mega-churches to micro-churches. Denominational loyalty is a long dead dinosaur.

Anxiety symptomizes in the self-destructive behaviors of clergy. Chronic tension between and within the faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam appears more acute.

The Serenity Prayer invites an accepting “of the things we cannot change.” An anxious society, an anxious religious climate, and the angst in local church would be on

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that list. But the Serenity Prayer also asks for courage to “change the things we can.” For me, my own level of anxiety and reactivity are on this list of courageous challenges.

**Second, systems thinking provides a map for working on myself.** The engine that drives human emotional processes is each person’s family of origin. This multi-generational process wires us with abilities and liabilities that surface and submerge depending on the relational terrain. The genogram or “family process map” is a tool that the systemic student uses to observe patterns and possibilities. This “family tree” attends to the depth of the roots and the arrangement of the limbs—all of which are held in the memory of the tree.

My maternal grandfather’s anxiety-alleviating (and anxiety-elevating) alcoholism—but also his graceful spirituality—are influences/choices in me as well. My grandmother’s adaptive enabling—but also her eventual capacity for self-definition—are in me. Exploring these family stories *while observing their impact and interaction within the family relationships* is an invigorating, life-giving exercise.

Many ministers know the vocabulary of systems thinking. *The emotional triangle, non-anxious presence, and self-differentiation* are familiar phrases. However, they are like signs hanging on a fitness center wall. For me, the most benefit of these concepts happens when I exercise in the gymnasium of the genogram—the fitness center of family relationships.

There is no substitute for this often difficult and often delightful family of origin work. In other words, one of the best continuing education gifts ministers can give congregations is to go to their family reunion.

Family of origin work is best done with a coach. In addition to individual monthly coaching from my supervisor, I am a part of a family systems group that meets for three days, twice a year. These consultations, in both settings, are vital to my exploration, because when it comes to emotional issues, we all tend to be blind to those processes which are most significant.

For ministers wanting to explore Family Systems Theory and workshops that many have found to be beneficial, I recommend the website [LeadershipInMinistry.com](http://LeadershipInMinistry.com). Dr. Larry Matthews is the leader of the Leadership In Ministry Workshops. He taught on the faculty with Ed Friedman. Larry uses the same model of study pioneered by Friedman and explained in the book *Generation to Generation*.<sup>5</sup>

As I look in the mirror of the fitting-room, I see how much my life has been enriched and my posture enhanced by these exercises. Also, I see how the sabbatical process (planning, departure, separation, return, reuniting) are systemic issues. The togetherness and differentiation forces are great in the congregation/minister’s relationship. Systems thinking helps me find my place of service, leadership, and joy with a map for ministry that matches the terrain of congregational life.

### **Only God gives salvation.**

The third observation reminds me from where salvation *cannot* come. As obvious as this may be to readers, it still is worth naming. Sooner or later, every minister has the opportunity to own that she or he has entered “the ministry” to continue working on

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unfinished issues from his or her own family of origin. To some degree, we are all searching to acquire the blessing we never fully received.

To be sure, there are other reasons we enter the ministry—the call of God, for instance! However, we are mixed bags of many motives—all of which God uses within God’s grace.

I assume further explanation and confession are not necessary here. Suffice it to say that “borrowing self” (to use a systemic term) tends to occur between pastors and congregations. When this lack of differentiation occurs, leadership is compromised due to the enmeshment.

However, epiphany moments happen when the minister realizes and affirms that it is not the church (or any other relationship system) which gives salvation. Salvation is something only God gives. One cannot work hard enough for the church to bestow it...and even if one could, it still would be conditional.

This “ah ha” is good news for the clergyperson and for the church. It encourages a “connected distance.” As Gibran the Lebanese poet put it, “Let there be spaces in your togetherness.”<sup>6</sup> This space is the place of soul growth, based not on dependency, but on differential *and* the adventure of connection with a community of faith.

Church members tell me that I am different following my sabbatical. They say I appear happier. I think they are right. But the appearing “happier” is a result of a deeper truth. Though this may be odd for a pastor to say, *I need the church less; therefore, I can love the church more.*<sup>7</sup> In the imagery of C.S. Lewis (*The Four Loves*) I’m freer to offer *gift love*, and less driven by *need love*. My preaching is freer. I am working less at “impression management” and more at awareness and expression.

A United Church of Christ minister/friend, Chris Graham, gifted me with the word *sabbatitude*. It is the notion retaining the grace of and freedom of sabbatical time while bringing it back to one’s life with the congregation. For instance, what difference might it make to attend the next Church Council meeting with one’s *sabbatitude* in place?

In keeping with my fitting-room metaphor, I came back to my pastorate knowing that alterations were needed. However, they are far less mechanical and far more relational (spiritual) than I anticipated. I returned with less need (notice I did not say “no need”) to fix the church, and with a greater capacity to love the church *and be loved by the church*. My supervisor, Franklin Duncan, says the latter is my greater challenge. All of the above is connected to my ability to love myself as I am—rather than the self I wish I were.

### ***Mantras as markers for ministry***

Earlier in the article I promised a listing of my mantras. These are notations (alterations) from my experiences, research, and reflection that addressed vulnerable areas in my life. I continue to be surprised at how well they name my slippery, growing edges and give daily traction. I offer them in collegiality and without much explanation.

- 1. Enjoy God.** (*The Westminster Shorter Catechism* says we are to “glorify God and enjoy [God] forever.” I have a Ph.D. in working hard trying to glorify God; but not even a high school diploma in enjoying God.)
- 2. Enjoy myself.**

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3. **Be gracious and forgiving to myself.** (‘Nuff said.)
4. **Rest in God.** (Notice the word is *rest* not *wrest*.)
5. **Pray prayers of filling and emptying.** (I watch my Muslim friends do this. I have something to learn from them.)
6. **Though I desire the affirmation of others, I am not as dependent upon it, for I have God’s affirmation.**
7. **Life is not something to be conquered.**
8. **I am expendable.**
9. **“We seek not the meaning of life; rather we seek the rapture of being alive.”**  
(Joseph Campbell)
10. **Attempting to find meaning in every action is like trying to ride a horse riding a horse.**<sup>8</sup>
11. **Obsession with emotional processes can wither the soul.**
12. **The need to win every small battle makes me small.**<sup>9</sup>
13. **I am a piece of the Milky Way.**
14. **Keep the love for God glowing brightly in my heart.**
15. **“Go on. It’s going to be all right; you’ve got everything you need.”**<sup>10</sup>
16. **Our lives are blown by the wind of God.**
17. **The success of others does not diminish mine.**
18. **“We are called not to prove ourselves, but to express ourselves; and oh, what a difference there is between proving and expressing.”** (William Sloan Coffin)
19. **“God, thank you for work that is more important than how I might feel about it at the time.”** (A prayer prayed by Fred Craddock.)
20. **God is a God of abundance.**

### *A final, backward glance*

The clothing store in my small hometown had a mirror in which I could see myself sideways. I could see *me* from various perspectives at the same time. My sabbatical offered the same—to look sideways again and ponder the ways I go at life and the posture of my life. This process was sacramental to me. It reaffirmed perspectives that helped me locate myself in the big picture. I returned to my congregational duties freer *from* the church and in so doing have been able to give myself more freely *to* and *through* the church. Indeed, only God saves and God’s salvation is beautiful.

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<sup>1</sup>Phil Cousineau excerpted from *Pilgrimage: Adventures of the Spirit*, edited by Sean O’Reilly and James O’Reilly, (San Francisco: Traveler’s Tales, 2000).

<sup>2</sup>“Why We Travel,” by travel writer Pico Iyer. The article appeared in Salon.com ([www.salon.com](http://www.salon.com)).

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<sup>3</sup>Lamkin, James E., “Systems Theory and Congregational Leadership: Leaves from an Alchemist’s Journal,” in *The Review and Expositor*, Volume 102, No. 3 Summer 2005.

<sup>4</sup>Brown, Robert McAfee, *Creative Dislocation—The Movement of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 107.

<sup>5</sup>Friedman, Edwin H., *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985), 1. “It is the thesis of this book that all clergymen and clergywomen, irrespective of faith, are simultaneously involved in three distinct families whose emotional forces interlock: the families within the congregation, our congregations, and our own.”

<sup>6</sup>Gibran, Kahlil, *The Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knoff), 15.

<sup>7</sup>This insight comes from my “family systems colleague” and friend, Rev. Betty Pugh, pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia. It is similar to a question she asked when I was anxious about a situation: “Could you care less, but give more?”

<sup>8</sup>Suzuki Roshi said about questioning our life, our purpose, “It’s like putting a horse on top of a horse and then climbing on and trying to ride. Riding a horse by itself is hard enough. Why add another horse? Then it’s impossible.” Quoted by Natalie Goldberg, in *Long Quiet Highway: Waking Up in America* (New York: A Bantam Book, 1993), 112.

<sup>9</sup>“When we win it’s with small things, and the triumph itself makes us small.” From Rainer Maria Rilke, “The Man Watching,” *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, translated by Robert Bly.

<sup>10</sup>This quotation, like the one before it, comes from Mother Teresa. It is cited in “Everything for God” by William Elliott, in *The Road Within* edited by Sean O’Reilly, James O’Reilly, and Tim O’Reilly (San Francisco: Travelers’ Tales) 2002.