

Sabbatical: Caring for the Soul of the Missionary
By Jim Van Meter

Five years ago, after 35 years of missions ministry, I took a 6 month sabbatical. I was introduced to the idea by a missionary friend. I had never heard of missionaries taking sabbaticals—home assignments or furloughs, yes, but not sabbaticals.

What is a missionary sabbatical? A sabbatical is an extended, directed period of time granted to the missionary to disengage from work/ministry responsibilities for a specific purpose: to experience deep rest for the restoration and renewal of the soul. That purpose, however, is sometimes unclear and confusing. In the academic world, sabbaticals are granted to professors to do research and writing, so that the mind is renewed and stimulated with new information. Sometimes sabbaticals are viewed as study leaves to pursue advanced academic degrees. Other times sabbaticals are granted in order to allow a person time to process complex, deep issues (family, transition, health, etc)

Time for research, writing, further studies, and processing ministry issues are good, important and even necessary. I would like, however, to encourage the missions community to look at sabbaticals as a neglected spiritual discipline that needs to be **part of the ongoing, long-term care** and nurture of the soul. The neglect of the care of the soul may be the secret disease of the heart of the missionary. One recent research study showed that only 26% of field missionary leaders view their relationship with God as one of their top strengths (<http://www.impactleader.org/report.html>) With missionaries continually faced with overloaded responsibilities and the stressful weight of local and world conditions, the temptation is to try to do more and “suck it up” by drawing upon emotional and spiritual reserves with no regular spiritual practices in place to replenish those reserves. The result: depleted souls, physical and emotional exhaustion, and often burnout! We wonder why missionaries come home prematurely, and pastors leave the ministry!

I entered into sabbatical for the express purpose of focusing on the renewal of my soul and my relationship with God. I had a sabbatical advisor, a support group, as well as a spiritual director/therapist, all of whom I met with regularly and all of whom played key roles in listening to, guiding and coming alongside me throughout the sabbatical. The result was that my soul was marked by deep rest: the previously muddied waters of my soul settled, and my love for God deepened like never before. I was deeply refreshed and energized from having received His uninterrupted love like never before since my youth.

Sabbaticals need to be viewed by missionaries, their agencies and donors as part of the needed long-term care for missionary staff. The good news is that some mission agencies are starting to experiment giving sabbaticals. The vision of one large agency is that sabbaticals become a normal practice of every missionary's journey taken once every 7-10 years for 3-6 months.

As I wrestled with “what will donors think”, one trusted friend, who happened to be a donor and mission agency CEO, said, “If at the end of your time of sabbatical, if you feel you need more time, be blessed to take it, because the kingdom of God needs you at your best 10 years from now!” He knew the long-term benefit and impact my sabbatical could have. I believe that a well cared for soul is the most important gift I can bring to my wife, my family, my ministry, and the kingdom of God. Sabbaticals are a necessary, needed and desired part of that long-term care.

Related resources: [Taking a Break From the Lord’s Work](#); [Study Says Clergy Neglecting Self-Care](#); “Sabbatical is not a Study Leave”, Eugene Peterson, Leadership, Winter 1988, 74-75.