

A sabbatical well spent – a parish paper

I write this as I come to the end of Sabbatical Part 2(b) as a reflection on the time spent over my Sabbatical; this is an overview paper for church members to get an idea of how I spent my time. A learning paper will be written on the research area for those interested. I recorded a video at the beginning of the Sabbatical outlining what I hoped to be do as I entered my twenty fourth year of ministry. It's fitting that I complete my sabbatical as I now go into the year where I will celebrate my twenty fifth (September 2023), which will mark the movement to being ordained longer than lay ministry.

The sabbatical took place over three parts, Part 1, April 2022, Part 2(a); August and September 2022 and part 2(b) in January 2023. I returned in Part 2 to lead commemorations for the death of HM Queen Elizabeth II thus giving a couple of weeks in January 2023.

Each part of the Sabbatical included;

Reading – Research – Rest - Retreat

Reading – The Pastor; Eugene Peterson

I took the decision to read a long book over the Sabbatical, so alongside the many books of fiction/biographies, I spent time sipping Eugene Peterson's; The Pastor. Given to me by someone who recognized the story within me, for 6 months over Part 2s a&b, I sipped the memoirs of someone becoming a pastor, reluctantly, and a life reflection on learning and experiencing that. A timely book for me, that spoke to me on nearly every other page, giving me time to pause and reflect, and confidence in the ministry long-term.

Research

There were three areas of action research I took to undertake whilst on Sabbatical. With each area I took a question with me;

Area of research	Accompanying Question
Large Churches	As we expect to grow, what do we need to learn and put in place?
Church buildings	As we start to build, what are the things we need to learn about the process as a leadership/church?
Church transitions	As we move from School to building, what are the things we need to be conscious about as a leader and as a leadership team to help the process?

I admit some of this was limited, as there is some uniqueness in what we are doing here at St Gabriel's.

Large Churches

We have previously been on the leadership team of large churches in both lay and ordained capacity, and had some experience of what it is like to lead, but also be someone in a pew. The main part of sabbatical research took on the new person 'view from the pew' but with some reflection post covid from long term members as churches have been refreshed. So in each church we visited we looked at areas such as welcome, contact, worship, activity days and engagement. These areas also were reflected on with long term members of large churches, plus the keeping connected.

Church Buildings

I was fortunate to be able to visit a new church being built, about eight to ten months ahead of our project. The church is a similar construction, shape and design as ours, only slightly larger. Sitting with the project manager and walking through the building, gave the confirmation of our design being correct for needs, but also gave some tips and pointers as to fundraising, problems and pitfalls and stages of opening.

Church Transitions

Alongside meeting with the new build (above) I spent time with a vicar who had taken a Church of England church from a school to a new building and all the processes in between. Allowing me to learn from them on what we need to look at, what we are doing well and areas to focus on.

Rest

A good part of the sabbatical was spent resting. This comprised of Un-hurried/un-guilty time with family and friends, holidaying with family and having adventures, being there for the transition between primary and secondary school, leading the marriage of my brother and indulging my passions of sport, arts, film and travel. We holidayed, doing things that we are not able to do normally, had weekends without the Sunday pressures, and I was able to be 'there' for family without the need to rush off. Our church visiting included holiday time, my travel visiting friends and sports included research but at other times I was able just to be with people, without having to think about rushing off to the next activity or think about what I haven't yet completed.

Retreat

As part of Part 1, I took a 4 day retreat at the Sisters of Saint Andrew's in Lewisham. This guided retreat focused on scripture reflection, and the unguided part focused on time use strategies.

And finally the learning won't stop....

Using part of my sabbatical grant I joined the Art of Leadership Academy for a year. This international community of church leaders comprises of a community app, deep courses and monthly leadership coaching calls, up-to-date research and short term courses. This is something that I am investing my time in, to continue to help and develop myself as a church leader and also St Gabriel's thrive.