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THE TRANSFORMATIONAL EFFECTS OF SABBATICAL IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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Christian leaders face stress and burnout in their professions.¹ Taking a sabbatical is one way leaders can protect their personal growth to develop in their leadership, but as a recently emerging phenomenon, there is little understanding of the process, its dynamics, or categories. Drawing from a range of theoretical sources, this research proposes a model for building neutral space into the overall sabbatical process to hypothesize a difference in outcomes when participants intentionally disengage for a period of time from their normal ministry context. An exploratory multi-methodological approach is used to address the theoretical model of including a neutral zone in a sabbatical process by sequentially linking qualitative interviews with sabbatical participants and developing a survey instrument grounded in their experiences, opinions, and observations. Using exploratory factor analysis and comparing the mean differences between sabbatical participants who structured neutral space into their sabbatical experience, and those that did not, quantitative results support the hypotheses of the research.

Leaders in Christian ministry face the likelihood of stress and burnout as a side effect of working in this profession. This reality is a reported fact among institutes and organizations dedicated to facilitating the health, personal growth, and leadership development of Christian leaders. London and Wiseman claim

¹ A. Richard Bullock and Richard J Bruesehoff, *Clergy Renewal: The Alban Guide to Sabbatical Planning* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2000).

45.5 percent of pastors from North America have experienced depression or burn out,² while The Alban Institute estimates up to 50 percent of professional ministers are exhausted from their work.³ Long unstructured hours come with the job, weekends are taken in preparing for and administering the church service, and high expectations are placed on the pastor as troubleshooter, conflict manager, counselor, or friend.⁴ For cross-cultural missionaries, 15 percent of first-term workers return home within two years, expended emotionally by their transition, the need to continually fundraise, and the cultural differences faced on the field.⁵ Like those who serve as church ministers, their work is often all consuming, but combined with cultural dynamics that can drain and frustrate, burnout is extremely common.⁶

Without focused and intentional rhythm, Christian leaders become emotionally and spiritually empty and are unable to effectively lead, function, or minister.⁷ Lack of boundaries enables pastors or missionaries to respond to the continual demands of their ministry to the detriment of their personal growth.⁸ Over time they are unable to effectively operate in their leadership, their journey stagnates, and passion is lost. Christian organizations are then lead by hollow and soulless individuals.⁹ Bullock and Bruesehoff contend that Christian leadership is fundamentally spiritual and that this form of leadership demands ongoing lifelong spiritual growth and nurture.¹⁰ Creating space for personal reflection is extremely difficult in the middle of a sixty-hour work week, particularly when Protestant work ethics and self-sacrifice are admired as honorable practices in Christian service.¹¹ Even when Christian leaders focus on personal growth or leadership development, the opportunity is filled with further study or training, rather than on focused reflection and rest. Intentional patterns and

² H. B. London and Neil B Wiseman, *Pastors at Greater Risk* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2003), 75.

³ See Roy Oswald, *Why You Should Give Your Pastor a Sabbatical* (Virginia Beach, VA: Alban, 2001).

⁴ Wheat Ridge Ministries, "Ministry Sabbatical Resource," http://www.wheatridge.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Sabbatical_Flyer_Updated2011.pdf; Paul Shrier, "Pastoral Burnout: How Churches and Pastors Are Working Together to Create Failure," *Azuza Pacific University Practical Theology Lecture Notes*, <http://groups.apu.edu/practicaltheo/LECTURE%20NOTES/Shrier/F10/Pastoral%20Burnout.pdf>.

⁵ Esther Schubert, *What Missionaries Need to Know About Burnout and Depression* (New Castle, IN: Olive Branch Publications, 1993), 4.

⁶ Ronald Koteskey, "What Missionaries Need to Know About Burnout." *Missionary Care: Resources for Missions and Mental Health*, http://www.missionarycare.com/brochures/br_burnout.htm.

⁷ Bryan P. Stone and Claire E Wolfeich, *Sabbath in the City: Sustaining Urban Pastoral Excellence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 42-46.

⁸ Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 119.

⁹ Ruth R. Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Finding God in the Crucible of Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 13-14; Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Lives* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), 1-5.

¹⁰ Bullock and Bruesehoff, *Clergy Renewal*, 1-62.

¹¹ Stone and Wolfeich, *Sabbath in the City*, 44.

rhythms that maximize performance are not widely practiced or modeled in Christian leadership or ministry¹² with palpable effect on the leadership and stewardship of Christian organizations.¹³

Substantial scholarly attention has been given to the topic of Sabbath, the space created in time where all are commanded to disengage from vocation to reconnect with personal purpose, freedom, and vitality.¹⁴ The relationship between this rhythm and the *shmita*, the sabbatical year in Jewish culture, is less understood. While sabbatical is a common phenomenon in academia where researchers take a period of time for fresh inspiration or academic direction,¹⁵ within Christian leadership it is regarded as an innovative and recently emerging practice despite its long history and traditional roots in Jewish agricultural practice.¹⁶ Consequently, sabbaticals are not regularly engaged or well practiced by Christian leaders, meaning outcomes are predictably variable.¹⁷ The few studies available present sabbatical as a phenomenon that can develop leadership capacity, foster personal growth, or positively affect organizational culture; yet, this is done without a clear presentation of how these outcomes emerge. Taking a sabbatical may make intuitive sense, but without comprehensive definition or theoretical foundation, assumed outcomes are tenuous at best.

Sabbatical as an independent variable requires further exploration as an emerging phenomenon that can be articulated, theoretically grounded, and empirically tested. The dependent variables of personal growth, leadership development, and lifestyles of rhythm, and how they are affected by how a leader engages their sabbatical process is also without adequate research. This study theoretically explores the relationship between how a Christian leader may intentionally or indiscriminately engage their sabbatical, and what differences exist in terms of sabbatical outcomes based on their posture. Exploring these dynamics and process will present significant evidence to help Christian leaders, their leadership teams, congregations, or sending organizations in specific ways, to understand: (a) the overall impact sabbatical can have in terms of personal transformation and leadership capacity development; (b) what expected outcomes of sabbatical can be in terms of investment and return for leaders and their leadership teams; and (c) the importance and function of taking time for

¹² Jim Loehr, James E. Loehr, and Tony Schwartz, *The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, Is the Key to High Performance and Personal Renewal* (New York: The Free Press, 2003), 110; Barton, *Strengthening the Soul*, 117-121.

¹³ Stone and Wolfeich, *Sabbath in the City*, 38-41.

¹⁴ Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), x-xv; Eugene H. Peterson, "The Good-for-Nothing Sabbath," *Christianity Today* 38, no. 4 (1994): 34-37; Muller, *Sabbath*, 1-5.

¹⁵ Kenneth J. Zahorski, *The Sabbatical Mentor: A Practical Guide to Successful Sabbaticals* (Boston: Anker Books, 1994), i-viii.

¹⁶ Steve Hoke, "Taking Sabbaticals Seriously," in *Global Mission Handbook: A Guide for Cross Cultural Service*, eds. Steve Hoke and Bill Taylor (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2009), 258-261.

¹⁷ Stone and Wolfeich, *Sabbath in the City*, 42-60.

personal reflection, regular Sabbath rest, intermittent retreats, and the effects they have in terms of personal transformation and leadership capacity development.

The purpose of this research study is therefore to better understand how Christian sabbaticals affect personal growth, leadership development, and ongoing sabbatical practices. To achieve this aim, the study first reviews current literature on Christian sabbaticals to raise three issues that will be further explored in wider literature from Biblical, theological, anthropological, sociological, and leadership theory to articulate a model and framework for Christian sabbatical that facilitates personal growth and leadership development, and catalyzes ongoing practices of reflection and rest.

I. LITERATURE REVIEW

Current literature on Christian sabbatical is sparse. Within academia a concept of sabbatical is broadly understood, yet within Christian ministry it is considered a recent and emerging phenomenon. This raises three issues. First, the dynamics inherent to a sabbatical process are not well understood. Hoke, writing for cross-cultural ministry practitioners, defines *sabbatical* as space and time away from ministry to reflect, study, and experience holistic refreshment to enable ongoing fruit.¹⁸ The Alban Institute qualifies the modern Christian sabbatical as a time to disengage, be renewed, and “nurture and cultivate our lives.”¹⁹ These two definitions both provide a scripted purpose for taking sabbatical, yet the capacity of the sabbatical process for enabling relational connection, internal transformation, and leadership development remains ambiguous.

Second, the process of taking a sabbatical is not well understood. It is normal for a Christian leader to take a sabbatical under a contractual obligation to return to service after its completion. Bullock and Bruesehoff argue, however, that following a sabbatical the church leader should have “enough freedom to change directions and let go of an old dream if a new vision emerges,”²⁰ but this is often not possible. Core to the findings in a study focusing on sustainable and creative Sabbath practices among ninety-six North American pastors, was the difficult reentry experienced by these leaders because of the degree of change occurring internally for them during their sabbatical.²¹ Certainly, a sabbatical process cannot be without boundaries or funded indefinitely, but does critically need structuring within a set amount of time and space where the individual can explore new opportunities without future performance expectations.

¹⁸ Hoke, *Taking Sabbaticals Seriously*, 259.

¹⁹ Bullock and Bruesehoff, *Clergy Renewal*, 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

²¹ Stone and Wolfeich, *Sabbath in the City*, 57.

Third, the categories of sabbatical are not well understood. Where language and categories enable connection with abstract concepts,²² a framework for taking a sabbatical, which accounts for both its processes and dynamics, is required. This last issue is perhaps the most serious because Christian leaders, often in desperate need of time to rest, reflect, and refocus, are blocked by their organizations from taking a sabbatical because it is conceptually misunderstood and envied by laity.²³ The following Biblical, theological, sociological, and anthropological theoretical perspectives attempt to address these issues of sabbatical dynamics, processes, and categories to articulate a framework for Christian sabbatical processes.

Biblical Perspectives

Sacred rhythm was hardwired into existence at creation as God formed three beats of time—day and night, weeks and months, seasons and years—to structure life (Gn 1: 4-14). Inherent to the constitution of time is ceasing. As God stops from his work to enjoy his creation, he models the gift of rest (Gn 2:1-3). This template of laboring over six days to rest on the seventh was elaborately commanded and reiterated to the Jews more than any other law.²⁴ This day of rest was blessed as *qadosh*, or made holy by God. The unfolding attribute of holiness as a characteristic of YHWH throughout the Torah is now first revealed in this moment, signifying the import of time over space where the civilizations surrounding the Jewish nation sanctified place over time.²⁵ This rest is instituted in Hebrew culture through the Sabbath, or *Shabbat*, a three-step rhythm of stopping, resting from work to engage a period without structure or demand, and reentering the next cycle. It took a generation for the Israelites to grasp this concept of rest after 400 unrelenting years as slaves to Pharaoh. God's command to rest appears directly on two occasions in Jewish law. The first is in admonition to mirror his actions (Ex 20:8-11), and secondly it is revealed as a gift of liberation that frees people from a dehumanizing mechanistic existence (Dt 5:15). Peterson powerfully supports this point stating, "The moment we begin to see others in terms of what they can *do*, rather than who they *are*, we mutilate humanity and violate community."²⁶ God did not rest then because he was tired; there was intentional agency in his choice, demonstrating he "was not enslaved

²² Kirsten F. Condry and Elizabeth S Spelke, "The Development of Language and Abstract Concepts: The Case of Natural Number," *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 137, no. 1 (2008): 22-38.

²³ Lilly Endowment Inc., "What Will Make Your Heart Sing? 2011," http://clergyrenewal.org/resources/2011_NCRP_application.pdf.

²⁴ Margaret Diddams, Lisa Surdyk, Denise Daniels, and Jeff Van Duzer, "Implications of Biblical Principles of Rhythm and Rest for Individual and Organizational Practice," *Christian Scholar's Review* 33, no. 3 (2004): 311-332.

²⁵ See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1951), part 2, chapter 3.

²⁶ Peterson, *The Good-for-Nothing Sabbath*, 36.

to [creation] but master over it."²⁷ In the same way for each individual, Sabbath is not simply a day off to stop from work and recuperate; it's a gift to be enjoyed.

Two additional rhythms are instituted in scripture, the *shmita*, or the sabbatical year (Lv 25:2-4), and the year of Jubilee, a Sabbath of Sabbaths (Lv 25:8-10). Both commands required the increased faith of the Jewish people in their God over their capacity to provide for themselves.²⁸ The *shmita* reflected an extended winter period where no agricultural work was practiced, the land was left barren, and nothing seemingly happened. Modern agricultural science now understands that by leaving the land fallow, soil structure is replenished, the spread and effects of pests in the food chain are reduced, and the ground is given literally time to heal.²⁹ The *shmita* was essential for ongoing fruitfulness. The Jubilee, an extreme practice that scholars even question occurring,³⁰ came with a command to reorganize economic, social, and judicial inequalities. Everything was leveled. Interestingly, at this point creation was, and still is, also reconstituted, for at the blowing of the shofar to announce the onset of Jubilee, "the sun and the moon return to their original positions relative to each other . . . with an error of only 32 hours," every forty-nine years.³¹ Sabbath rhythm in the *shmita* and Jubilee ensured dependence on God over personal or corporate ability, continuing fruitfulness, and social restitution, while being rooted and reflected in clearly identifiable seasonal markers.

Human development is grounded in these rhythms of creation. Trugman claims, "The very essence of the sabbatical year expresses the proper balance between the physical world we live and the spiritual foundations on which it rests."³² Buchanan connects this incarnational expression of sabbatical rhythm to personal development and transformation in the teachings of Jesus.³³ As Lord of the Sabbath, abiding in him is the only way in which his followers produce lasting kingdom fruit (Mk 2:28; Jn 15:16). This process requires all seasons, including winter pruning to produce fruit, "but only one season bears it."³⁴ The sparseness of winter is required to develop the roots of our lives, and it grates against humanity's need for ever-present tangible and observable outcomes.

²⁷ Diddams et al., *Implications of Biblical Principles*, 314.

²⁸ Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath*, 29-33.

²⁹ Scott Russell Sanders, "Wilderness as a Sabbath for the Land," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 2, no. 2 (2002): 210-216.

³⁰ Dennis T. Olson, "Sacred Time: The Sabbath and Christian Worship," in *Sunday, Sabbath, and the Weekend: Managing Time in a Global Culture*, eds. Edward O'Flaherty, Rodney L. Peterson, and Timothy A. Norton (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 43-66.

³¹ *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Online*, s.v. "Astronomy, I," <http://www.internationalstandardbible.com/A/astronomy-i.html>.

³² Avraham Arie Trugman, *The Meaning of the Sabbatical Year*, <http://www.canfeinesharim.org/learning/torah.php?page=16581>, para. 10.

³³ Mark Buchanan, *Spiritual Rhythm: Being with Jesus Every Season of Your Soul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 210-214. Kindle edition.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

Sabbatical rhythm therefore forces a time of inactivity or barrenness where true personal development and future effectiveness are fully realized.

Sociological and Anthropological Perspectives

Bridges, writing from a sociological perspective, notes the same basic structures that guide life's transitions where, "there is an ending, then a beginning, [with] an *important empty fallow time in between*. That is the order of things in nature. . . . Human affairs flow along similar channels."³⁵ Bridges defines this fallow period as a neutral zone, or a moment in which personal transformation and growth can be explored internally before an individual reengages their next season or stage of life that is structured both creatively and differently. Within anthropology, this neutral zone was observed in African tribal rites of passage and defined as *liminality*, or a moment where an individual temporarily transitions between social roles and is afforded the space to internalize this change.³⁶ Liminality also enables psychological and emotional space for the community to recognize and embrace the social effects of the transition. What is noteworthy for this research is in how the *neophyte*, the subject of the passage rite, is often profoundly isolated, separated, and effectively neutralized from previous responsibilities by this process and experiences deep emotional and psychological disorientation. There is ethnographically observed correlation between entering this state and the degree of transformation or change in the person themselves. Turner also clearly indicates where liminality is violated or desecrated the offending individual cannot progress and may even be excommunicated from community.³⁷

Leadership Perspectives

In leadership theory, Clinton proposes similar concepts in how individuals are processed in their personal and professional growth. For Clinton, leadership is primarily spiritual, effective when grounded in character and values (being), rather than skills or competencies (doing). It is formed in individuals over a lifetime where periods of isolation and separation are the most successful vehicles in delivering such maturity, or "one way that God forces a leader into

³⁵ William Bridges, *Transitions. Making Sense of Life's Changes: Strategies for Coping with the Difficult, Painful, and Confusing Times in Your Life* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004), 17, italics added.

³⁶ See Victor Turner, *Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967); Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge, 2004), 1-14.

³⁷ Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage," in *Betwixt and Between: Patterns of Masculine and Feminine Initiation*, eds. Louise Carus Mahdi, Steven Foster, and Meredith Little (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing, 1994), 3-22.

reflective evaluation and into a 'being' stage."³⁸ Isolation catalyzes internal shifts, personal growth, and leadership development.

Parsing together these theoretical perspectives then provides a model, or set of categories, for sabbatical practice, and a window into how the structure of this process can catalyze a dynamic of transformational change in Christian leaders. Table 1 draws together the sabbatical stages of Dawn, Bridges's sociological framework of transition, and Turner's and Van Gennepe's anthropological models.³⁹

Table 1. Transition stages from four theoretical perspectives

| Author | Theoretical approach | Stage 1 | Stage 2 | Stage 3 |
|-------------|----------------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|
| Dawn | Spiritual | Ceasing | Resting | Embracing |
| Bridges | Sociological | Ending | Neutral zone | Beginning |
| Turner | Anthropological | Pre-liminal | Liminal | Post-liminal |
| Van Gennepe | Anthropological | Separation | Margin | Aggregation |

Each theory, although using alternate language, ideas, or categories, proposes a three-step process through which transformation occurs. This study uses the model of Bridges to define sabbatical as a process that includes endings, a neutral zone, and new beginnings where new rhythms are instituted. The neutral zone is defined as a period of time and space where the individual is removed from their work and ministry context, in a similar way to neophytes in the liminal stage of their passage rights, to experience profound psychological, emotional, and sociological disorientation and be enabled through this isolation or separation to reflect, connect inwardly, and develop both personally and in leadership capacity. A working definition of leadership development draws on Clinton⁴⁰ and is articulated as a lifelong process, rooted in character and values, and matured in the personal formation made possible through the isolation processing of the neutral zone.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

If personal growth, leadership capacity, and lifestyle changes are then forged and developed through periodic rest and times of isolation, the neutral zone of a sabbatical process theoretically influences a development or change in each of these areas. Core to this contention, the following research question is then proposed. Does a sabbatical process that incorporates a neutral zone experience result in significant outcomes in terms of a leader's personal growth,

³⁸ Robert J. Clinton, *The Making of a Leader: Recognizing the Lessons and Stages of Leadership Development* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), 161.

³⁹ See Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath*; Bridges, *Transitions*, 107-157; Turner, *Between and Between*, 3-22; van Gennepe, *Rites of Passage*, 38.

⁴⁰ Clinton, *Making of a Leader*, 17-28.

their leadership development, and lifestyle rhythms that emerge from the process? This logic informs the central objective of the research study to provide a deeper understanding of the differences in sabbatical outcomes, in terms of personal growth, leadership development, and post-sabbatical practices, and their relationship to how a Christian leader engages the sabbatical process. Framing an independent variable with two groups, those that do engage the theorized neutral zone during their sabbatical and those that do not, operationalizes this objective. The differences between these two groups in the related dependent variables of personal growth, leadership development, and lifestyle rhythms can then be explored. Figure 1 provides the proposed model of the research. The substantive hypotheses of this research are then as follows:

- H₁: There is a difference in the personal growth of Christian leaders who engage a full sabbatical process that includes a neutral zone and those who do not.
- H₂: There is a difference in the leadership capacity of Christian leaders who engage a full sabbatical process that includes a neutral zone and those who do not.
- H₃: There is a difference in the practice of post-sabbatical rhythms of Christian leaders who engage a full sabbatical process that includes a neutral zone and those that do not where:
 - H_{3a}: theorizes difference in the rhythm of daily reflection
 - H_{3b}: theorizes difference in the rhythm of weekly rest
 - H_{3c}: theorizes difference in the rhythm of taking personal regular retreats
 - H_{3d}: theorizes difference in the rhythm of taking extended periods of rest

III. METHOD

A sequential exploratory two-phased mixed methods approach was used to address the research question and hypotheses to seek greater understanding of the sabbatical process, identify themes where sabbatical affects each of the dependent variables, and generalize these findings to a broader population.

The philosophical foundation for using a mixed methods strategy in this research is to “emphasize the research problem and use all approaches available to understand [it].”⁴¹ As a pragmatic approach, it then utilizes qualitative and quantitative data collection instruments to interrogate a research problem from diverse perspectives and methodologies and sequentially connect the findings of one approach with the other. Where little research has been conducted regarding the emerging concept and practice of sabbatical among Christian leaders, this philosophy provides an appropriate method with which to explore more deeply the experience and meaning of sabbatical for participants,

⁴¹ John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009).

and test potential relationships between the sabbatical process and its outcomes in terms of personal growth, leadership development, and post-sabbatical lifestyle rhythms.

The Sabbatical Process

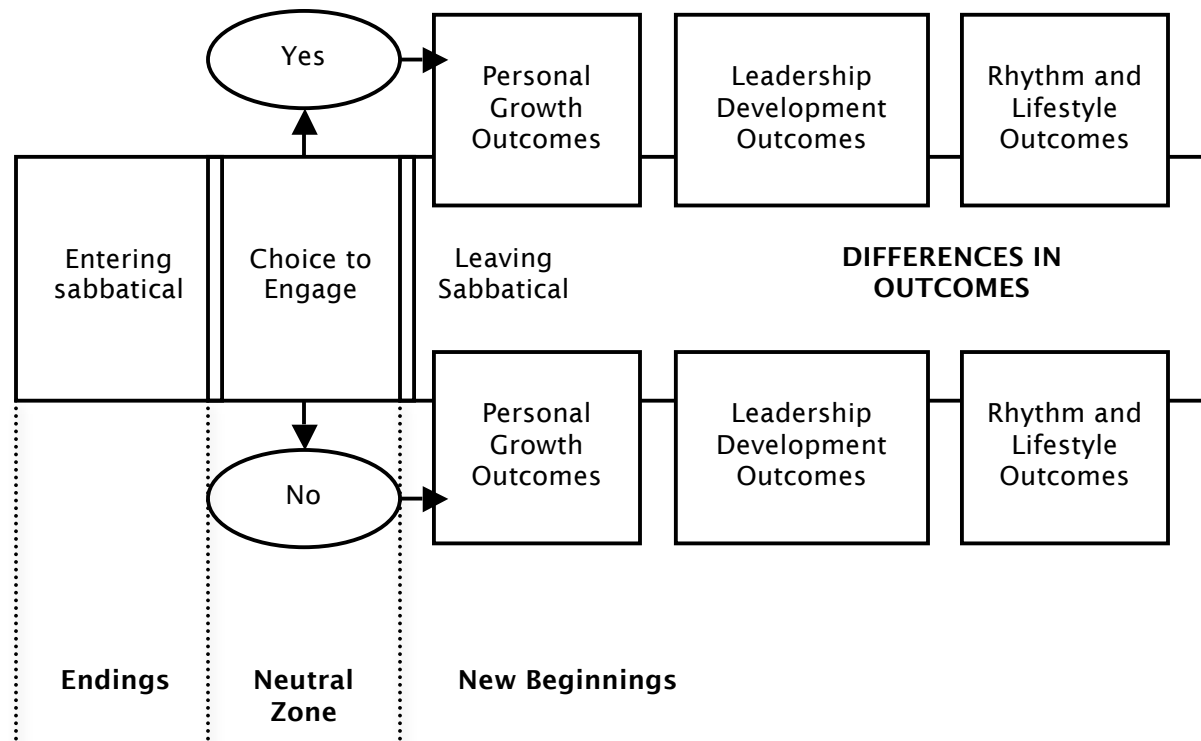


Figure 1. The process of sabbatical and theorized differences in outcomes between those that choose to engage a neutral zone and those who do not.

The first phase of the research was qualitative in focus and conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews with two staff from Growth Dynamics International (GDI), an organization committed to facilitate and coach sabbaticals for Christian leaders. The purpose of these interviews was to develop, confirm, and refine taxonomy, identify concepts, and standardize language for a follow-up set of semi-structured interviews with purposefully sampled sabbatical participants. The use of purposeful sampling is beneficial when the researcher can select specific cases that have experienced the central phenomenon and were deemed suitable for the first phase of this study's approach. Five leaders, one female and four males, were sampled for this study. Each engaged a sabbatical process with the support and facilitation of GDI and were consequently familiar with the definitions, concepts, and theoretical premises established in this research. These five individuals were all senior or associate pastors of churches in North America. All but one transitioned into different roles following the sabbatical.

The interviews were conducted over four weeks through Skype, recorded with the permission of the respondents, transcribed using electronic dictation software, and cross-checked for irregularities. This strategy was used to illuminate where and how individual engagement of the sabbatical process differed; provide greater understanding of the phenomenon's dynamics, processes, and categories; and generate themes or areas of interest to inform the development of a survey instrument "grounded in the views of the participants."⁴²

The second phase of the study attempted to generalize findings to a wider population of sabbatical participants by using quantitative methodologies through the development of a survey instrument based on findings indicated by the qualitative phase of the research. The instrument was developed by coding the transcripts and selecting relevant quotes to identify themes central to the issues of this study in order to connect the two phases of the research in the development of this survey instrument. The item pool generated through structuring the raw interview data into a set of statements regarding personal growth, leadership development, and sabbatical practices was shared with GDI staff for their critical review. Three subsequent drafts of the survey instrument were collaboratively developed, tested for portability for a wider range of respondents, validated by pilot testing with two individuals, and posted to Survey Monkey for data collection over a four-week period. This data collection method was used for its convenience and efficiency because of the international locations of respondents. The population for this stage of the research was collected through a single-stage convenience sampling based on the proximity and availability of sabbatical participants, predominantly through GDI, Youth With A Mission (YWAM), Church Resource Ministries (CRM), and a network of churches in Westminster, London. Through the process of collecting data, respondents who had taken a sabbatical forwarded the link to others within their broader organizational networks. Consequently individuals from every continent

⁴² Ibid., 219.

but South America completed the survey with the main grouping of respondents being based in North America and Europe. In total, the survey generated seventy-six responses. Five were incomplete and therefore dismissed from subsequent analysis. Of the respondents, forty-two were male and twenty-nine were female. Fifty-one of the individuals reported structuring a neutral zone between three and six weeks into their sabbatical experience that included: (a) isolation from their home and ministry context; (b) profound emotional, psychological, and sociological disengagement; and (c) were consequently enabled to connect more deeply with God and identify personal growth and leadership development outcomes. Twenty of the respondents did not intentionally structure this space into their sabbatical experience. Respondents were all actively involved in full-time Christian ministry going into their sabbatical, serving in capacities ranging from church leadership, worship leading, arts, teaching, and cross-cultural ministry.

IV. QUALITATIVE RESULTS

The purpose of the qualitative interviews was to develop a survey instrument based on the understanding, experiences, and observations of sabbatical by participants, mentors, or coaches. A range of questions were developed that focused on each leader's sabbatical process and structure, readily identifiable personal growth and leadership transformation outcomes, and subsequent life patterns and rhythms that emerged from the process. The full interview protocols for GDI staff and sabbatical participants are provided in Appendix A and Appendix B.

GDI staff contended that the key areas of personal growth emerging in the neutral zone of a sabbatical process are primarily relational. The following four relational dimensions were highlighted: (a) relationship with God; (b) self-identity; (c) relationship with family (spouse, children, or immediate family members); and (d) relationships with core individuals, fellow leaders, mentors, or friends. These are vital themes around which GDI sabbatical coaches have observed tangible outcomes. One staff member stated, "If things are not working at the relational micro level, they will not work at the leadership macro level; they are connected,"⁴³ adding credence to the contention that effective leadership flows from personal growth and relational health.⁴⁴ Operating out of a well-founded relational paradigm then creates space for a leader to collaborate with and facilitate those individuals in their sphere of authority, releasing synergy and influence in new ways.⁴⁵ GDI staff generally identified a second range of leadership outcomes based on the personal growth experienced in the neutral zone of a sabbatical. These included increased freedom, creativity, delegation, and focus in leadership practice, but were more specifically identified and

⁴³ W. Good (Life Coach, GDI), in discussion with authors, February 2, 2011.

⁴⁴ Bullock and Bruesehoff, *Clergy Renewal*, 1-62; Clinton, *Making of a Leader*, 161.

⁴⁵ Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2006), 40.

addressed in the responses of sabbatical participants. Additionally, leaders were observed by GDI staff to be intentional about ensuring rhythms and practices were sustained in their lives following sabbatical to stimulate ongoing reflection, relational connection, and leadership development and continue in ongoing transformation.

Based on these observations, a second protocol with a set of open-ended questions was refined for sabbatical participants to flesh out their personal growth and leadership outcome experiences of the neutral zone. Of the five pastors interviewed, each one of them indicated that the isolation period of their sabbatical enabled them to connect with God in new ways and see new dimensions of their personal identity in light of this relationship. For example, one leader, noting how the neutral zone experience forced him to reassess his personal identity as a son of God and not as a slave, “liberated [him] from obligation,”⁴⁶ giving him a deeper sense of self awareness and enabling him to lead with greater freedom by empowering others to use their strengths and gifts in complimentary ways. Equally, each of the five leaders interviewed reported how the space of the neutral zone enabled the identification of core issues in their marriages and/or immediate families that lead to greater intimacy and connection, and ultimately effective leadership. One leader clearly identified the relational chasm exposed by the sabbatical process and their internal realization how this was undermining effective leadership because, “if it was not working for [my spouse], then it was not working for me, or anyone under my leadership.”⁴⁷ Finally, four of the respondents noted how their sabbatical affected how they interacted with their leadership teams and wider community at the backend of the process. For each individual, leadership development outcomes were contingent on these relational and personal growth changes. For example, one leader reflected that after, and because of, their sabbatical, “there was a tremendous realignment of relationships in the church. They now have a different quality . . . paved in a way that is deeper or more long-term,”⁴⁸ and because of these changes, the entire organizational culture of this leader’s group became more reflective, organic, and kingdom orientated.

The leadership outcomes based on the personal growth items experienced by sabbatical participants grouped into six core themes and included leadership: (a) position, (b) delegation, (c) confidence, (d) effectiveness, (e) encouragement, and (f) creativity. Four of the leaders interviewed expressed how their sabbatical process facilitated a shift in their thinking regarding position, authority, and influence. This for them was the key variable that supported other leadership outcomes. All but one of the pastors ended up in a different role following their sabbatical, with each respondent indicating that even if the new role came with less responsibility and, in one case, no formal position or responsibility, authority was experienced qualitatively differently. With increased comfort and confidence to functionally maximize leadership performance, each

⁴⁶ Respondent A (Sabbatical Participant), interview A, February 18, 2011.

⁴⁷ Respondent B (Sabbatical Participant), interview B, February 17, 2011.

⁴⁸ Respondent A, interview.

pastor was enabled to be increasingly intentional about their focus and therefore quicker to delegate and encourage other leaders in their capacities. Consequently, all respondents reported greater leadership effectiveness as a result of their sabbatical. Finally, four of the leaders expressed how in process of becoming clearer about their sphere of influence a new creativity and freedom was possible. As one of the leaders reported, "The net result [of sabbatical] was a serious increase in creativity and focus into the next arena of my life; my whole understanding of leadership has become more creative."⁴⁹

Finally, the third and final thematic change identified by the five interview respondents regarding sabbatical outcomes was an increased awareness of how important rhythms and practices were and how they could be instituted into their lifestyles after sabbatical in innovative ways. These practices were also engaged differently, with a higher anticipation and even expectation than before their neutral zone experience. One respondent noted:

I think I engaged rhythms and took personal retreats before the sabbatical, but during the sabbatical it went to a whole new level. Now it's so, so different. I need to do this, put it on my calendar and, now it's more like "when can I do this."⁵⁰

The practices where positive change occurred for each of the five respondents included more consistent: (a) daily reflection; (b) a weekly day of rest from work; (c) periodic retreats for extended reflection and renewal; and (d) extended periods of rest, or future sabbaticals.

V. INSTRUMENT DEVELOPMENT

Based on interview findings from the first phase of the research, three general outcomes experienced by sabbatical participants were identified. Each of these three areas provided support to the theoretical premises suggested in this research that periods of isolation are instrumental in facilitating personal growth, leadership development, and changed practices in lifestyle rhythms after the sabbatical. Each of these three themes were incorporated into a survey instrument to connect the two phases of the research process in an attempt to generalize the findings to the wider population⁵¹ of Christian leaders who have taken a sabbatical.

For the two themes of personal growth and leadership development, a set of ten statements, based on the respective variables identified in the research's first-phase findings, were developed to test sabbatical participants' level of agreement against each statement on a five-point Likert scale (1 [*strongly agree*] through 5 [*strongly disagree*]). For the theme of sabbatical practices or rhythms, a similar set of statements were developed to assess respondents' level of agreement on the same Likert scale regarding practices before and after their sabbatical experience. The instrument also used the theoretical definition of the

⁴⁹ Respondent C (Sabbatical Participant), interview C, February 26, 2011.

⁵⁰ Respondent D (Sabbatical Participant), interview D, February 18, 2011.

⁵¹ Creswell, *Research Design*, 216-217.

neutral zone to generate the categorical groupings required to test the hypotheses of this study. This definition was tested for its portability and comprehension before the survey was conducted. The overall survey instrument and each variable statement was reviewed by co-researchers and refined with their feedback then finally pilot tested for timing, content, irregularities, and the logical order of questions. The survey instrument is provided in Appendix C.

VI. QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Based on the ten personal growth and leadership development scales identified in the qualitative phase of the research, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted using principle component analysis with Varimax orthogonal rotation in PASW Statistics 18.0. This analysis initially yielded one latent root factor for analysis with an Eigen value greater than one. However, the scree plot criterion suggested two factors should be retained for analysis so a second data reduction test was conducted forcing a two-factor loading output. The results of this analysis are provided in table 2.

Table 2. Exploratory factor analysis rotated component matrix of ten relationship and leadership variables ($N = 71$)

| Variable | Factor loading | |
|----------------|----------------|-------------|
| | Component 1 | Component 2 |
| Relationship | | |
| God* | .63 | .50 |
| Family | .58 | .33 |
| Self-identity | .78 | .34 |
| Friends | .85 | .15 |
| Leadership | | |
| Effectiveness | .42 | .73 |
| Delegation | .15 | .81 |
| Confidence | .43 | .68 |
| Position** | .69 | .41 |
| Creativity | .38 | .81 |
| Encouragement* | .58 | .61 |

NOTE: Factor loadings greater than .65 are in boldface. * = Low discriminant value between factors and omission in third analysis. ** = Theoretically weak loading variable.

Based on the sample size of seventy-one, a statistical significance value of .65 is required for a .05 alpha level with a power of 80 percent in order for the variable to be retained in the factor. Practical significance is set at .50.⁵² Three

⁵² Joseph F. Hair, Rolph E Anderson, Ronald L Tatham, and William C. Black, *Multivariate Data Analysis* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall International, 1998), 112.

items were consequently removed because they either did not meet these criteria, or the discriminant value between variable scores across the two factors was not sufficient to warrant retention. Leadership position, leadership encouragement, and relationship with God were therefore consequently omitted and a final analysis was conducted. This factor analysis generated two factors accounting for a cumulative total of 70.47 percent of the variance for the seven retained variables. Factor 1 cleanly loaded the leadership variables, while factor 2 cleanly loaded the relationship, or personal growth variables, both satisfying the criteria for statistical significance and discriminant value. The Cronbach's alpha reliability of each factor was .86 and .77 respectively. These results are presented in table 3.

Table 3. Exploratory Factor Analysis Rotated Component Matrix and Communalities for retained Leadership and Relationship Variables ($N = 71$)

| Variable | Factor loading | | Communalities |
|---------------|----------------|--------------|---------------|
| | Leadership | Relationship | |
| Relationship | | | |
| Self-identity | .27 | .745 | .63 |
| Family | .43 | .722 | .70 |
| Friends | .21 | .841 | .75 |
| Leadership | | | |
| Effectiveness | .75 | .41 | .73 |
| Delegation | .78 | .16 | .64 |
| Confidence | .75 | .34 | .67 |
| Creativity | .83 | .34 | .80 |

NOTE: Factor loadings greater than .65 are in boldface.

Both factors were used as separate variables for further analysis. Substantively, this exploratory factor analysis identified two independent dimensions of responses from among the sabbatical survey instrument respondents, one regarding leadership outcomes and the other regarding relational outcomes.

The two extracted factors were then analyzed as dependent variables against the two groupings created by the responses to the survey question designed to ascertain if the participant structured neutral space into their overall sabbatical experience or not. Independent t -tests were used to test H_1 and H_2 . An alpha significance level of .05 was used for each statistical test. Participants who structured a neutral zone into their sabbatical process reported higher leadership outcome scores ($M = -.15$, $SD = .88$) than those that did not ($M = .39$, $SD = 1.19$), $t(69) = -2.11$, $p < .05$. Also those individuals who took neutral space in their sabbatical process reported higher personal growth outcome scores ($M = -.29$, $SD = .77$) than those who did not ($M = -.72$, $SD = 1.15$), $t(26.04) = -3.64$, $p < .001$. Consequently, H_1 and H_2 were supported by the results of the analysis.

While the variables of leadership position, leadership encouragement, and relationship with God were not retained in the final exploratory factor analysis, independent *t*-test analyses of each variable indicated that participants who structured neutral space into their sabbatical responded with higher scores than those that did not. Results for each variable included: (a) leadership position, $t(69) = -3.80, p < .001$; (b) leadership encouragement, $t(24.58) = -2.98, p < .006$; and (c) relationship to God, $t(21.22) = -3.36, p = .003$.

A second series of independent *t*-tests were conducted to address H_3 to ascertain if there was significant difference between the two groups regarding changes in respondent's pre- and post-sabbatical rhythms or practices. This was conducted by computing composite variables from the data set that took after-sabbatical rhythm scores in the four categories of daily reflection, weekly rest, regular retreats, and extended periods of rest and subtracting before-sabbatical scores on the same four scales. The outputted variables D1 for daily reflection, D2 for weekly rest, D3 regular personal retreats, and D4 for extended periods of rest, were then tested for differences between the two categorical groupings. For each variable tested, those that took a neutral zone as part of their sabbatical reported higher scores on the difference between after-sabbatical rhythm practices subtracting before-sabbatical practice scales, than those that did not. Results are presented in table 4. Consequently H_{3a} , H_{3b} , H_{3c} , and H_{3d} are each supported by the results of this analysis.

Table 4. Independent *t*-tests of rhythm variables and difference between sabbaticals with and without neutral zone groupings

| Variable | <i>M (SD)</i> | | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> |
|----------|----------------------|----------------------|----------|-----------|----------|
| | Group 1 ^a | Group 2 ^b | | | |
| D1 | -.84 (1.08) | -.15 (.88) | -2.55 | 69.00 | .01 |
| D2 | -.80 (1.13) | -.05 (.60) | -3.62 | 62.39 | .001 |
| D3 | -.96 (1.30) | -.25 (.85) | -2.70 | 52.71 | .009 |
| D4 | -1.02 (1.19) | -.20 (.89) | -2.78 | 69.00 | .007 |

NOTE: Group 1 sabbatical with neutral zone, Group 2 sabbatical without neutral zone. D1 = daily reflection, D2 = weekly rest, D3 = regular retreats, D4 = extended rest.

^a $n = 51$.

^b $n = 20$.

VII. DISCUSSION

The findings of this exploratory research indicate that each of the hypotheses are both substantiated in the qualitative results of sabbatical participants and supported in the quantitative results of a wider population of Christian leaders. This is one of the key strengths of a multi-methods approach to research.⁵³ There is a significant difference in terms of personal growth,

⁵³ Creswell, *Research Design*, 14.

leadership development, and ongoing lifestyle rhythms for those individuals who structured a neutral zone into their sabbatical process.

However, in the exploratory factor analysis, three component variables were omitted from the final solution including relationship to God, leadership position, and leadership encouragement. While the relationship to God variable was practically significant within the relationship factor, it was also highly correlated with the leadership factor so it was deleted from the exploratory analysis for low discriminate validity. The same scenario occurred for the leadership encouragement variable, while leadership position loaded theoretically on the wrong factor and was also taken out of the final data set. Interestingly, the issue of leadership position was a key outcome identified by the respondents of the research's first phase as contingent in facilitating other leadership outcomes emerging from the neutral zone. Where leaders were less vested in positional authority, they were increasingly enabled to delegate, be more confident, and more focused in dispensing their leadership. While this variable was not retained in the final exploratory factor analysis, an independent *t*-test analysis of leadership position indicated participants who structured neutral space into their sabbatical indicated an extremely high statistical difference between the two groups in its own right.

Despite the strength of the findings in support of the hypotheses, the study contains equally significant limitations. Most pertinent are the sampling methods in each phase of the research. In the qualitative phase of the research, the participants were purposely sampled as leaders who had intentionally built in neutral space to their sabbatical process. The quality of this research could be enhanced by including an equal amount of individuals in this phase of the research that had not structured their sabbatical in such a way. This would also minimize claims the research fit the sample and its data to the theoretical model it proposes. Secondly, the convenience sampling strategy of the quantitative stage of the research, while necessary because the phenomenon of taking a Christian sabbatical is quite rare, opens this research up to several further poignant critiques. First, the results collected from participants may be dated. For many participants, their sabbatical clearly occurred within the last year, but there was no way to empirically ensure all participants had taken their sabbatical within a particular timeframe. Second, and related to this first issue, is the question of data recall. Survey responses from the quantitative phase of the research are retrospective, are without longitudinal baseline data, and could be skewed because of potential response bias.⁵⁴

This research however has significant implications for Christian leaders, leadership teams, and supporting organizations in terms of how leaders engage and structure a sabbatical process. It is clear in the qualitative findings that each individual experiences their sabbatical process in a significantly personal way. No formula can dictate or guarantee outcomes. Yet, for those individuals that do

⁵⁴ Michael Q. Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002), 49-53; Fred N. Kerlinger and Howard B Lee, *Foundations of Behavioral Research* (Orlando: Harcourt College Publishers, 2002), 693-702.

intentionally engage a context that is separate from their work and ministry for a period between three to six weeks, an environment is created where accelerated personal growth and consequent leadership development is both facilitated and enabled. Leaders who have followed this three-stage process of ending, entering such a neutral zone, and re-engaging what follows their sabbatical, create significant territory for the dynamics of personal growth and relational issues to emerge within this process. Equally, they are more expectant of continued personal transformation in maintaining ongoing lifestyle rhythms following the experience. The potential upside for leaders and their networks, in terms of how sabbaticals can be fruitfully engaged in a way that is complimentary for the wider community are clearly evident in the research's findings.

Finally, where this study articulates an important theoretical framework for the categories, process, and dynamics of the sabbatical experience for Christian leaders, further research must be conducted around these concepts incorporating longitudinal strategies that establish less biased or post hoc baseline data. Equally, further research of participants who have not intentionally built in neutral space to their overall sabbatical experience can be collected to assess the qualitative outcomes in terms of personal growth, relationships, leadership capacity, or lifestyle rhythms to compare these results with those of this study.

The practice of sabbatical was Biblically modeled, morally commanded, and historically experienced by the Jews for their ongoing fruitfulness and enjoyment. Engaging similar practices and rhythms potentially protects those who administer churches, organizations, or ministries at home or abroad, from becoming the soulless directors readily identified by research regarding the contemporary health of Christian leadership. Rather, in living a lifestyle of ongoing rhythm and reflection, with periodic sabbatical experiences where neutral space is structured within the process, leaders can reclaim, retain, and sustain relational and personal integrity, and be transformed in their leadership capacity.

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APPENDIX A

Interview protocol for GDI staff:

1. What constitutes a “well-engaged” sabbatical from the perspective of GDI?
2. In what ways do you see leaders develop as a result of engaging a sabbatical process?
3. In what ways do you see leaders personally grow, change (or not) as a result of taking a sabbatical?
4. What concept of a “neutral zone” does GDI hold and if so, what do you see occurring in that stage of the sabbatical process?
5. What additional questions could be added or changed in the proposed question list for the key informants?

APPENDIX B

Interview protocol for sabbatical participants:

1. How did you find the experience of sabbatical?
 - a. What were some of the highlights or benefits of your sabbatical?
 - b. What were some discouragements or disappointments of your sabbatical?
2. In what ways did you experience personal growth in your sabbatical process?
 - a. What made this possible?
 - b. What were the keys to this growth?
3. How has sabbatical changed your leadership capacity and paradigms and/or your understanding of Kingdom life?
4. How well did you engage Sabbath rhythms and cycles (days off, personal retreats) before your sabbatical? And how has your understanding of the Sabbath principle changed?
5. What were the reasons, external triggers, or what initiated the sabbatical process for you?
6. Was there a point in your sabbatical where it played out differently than you expected? What were the outcomes?
7. When you started your sabbatical, how long did you think it was going to be?
8. Did your sabbatical lead to unexpected outcomes or unfold as you expected? If there were unexpected outcomes what were they?
9. Why sabbatical? Why is it worth it? Why do it?

APPENDIX C

Survey instrument for sabbatical participants:

Question 1. Please provide your level of agreement with the following statements. (1 = *strongly agree*, 2 = *agree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *disagree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*).

- My sabbatical has helped improve my relationship with God.
- My sabbatical has helped improve how I see and understand myself.
- My sabbatical has helped improve my relationships with my friends and co-leaders.
- My sabbatical has helped improve my relationship(s) with my family (spouse, children, and/or immediate family).
- My sabbatical has helped me be a better leader.
- My sabbatical has helped me lead because I no longer feel that I have to do everything and can delegate more.
- My sabbatical has helped me encourage others in their leadership.
- My sabbatical has helped me lead with creativity and freedom.
- My sabbatical has helped improve my leadership by freeing me to do less, more effectively.
- My sabbatical has helped me lead with less regard for position or title.

Question 2. As a part of your sabbatical, did you intentionally incorporate a period of time between three to six weeks where you were: (a) totally separated and isolated from work and ministry; (b) experienced profound emotional, psychological, and sociological disengagement; and (c) consequently were enabled to connect with God, be reflective, and develop personally in transformational ways.

Answer: Yes/No.

Question 3. Please provide your level of agreement with the following statements. (1 = *strongly agree*, 2 = *agree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *disagree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*).

- Before my sabbatical I took time each day for personal reflection.
- Before my sabbatical I took a weekly day of rest.
- Before my sabbatical I took regular personal retreats.
- Before my sabbatical I took extended periods of rest.
- After my sabbatical I took time each day for personal reflection.
- After my sabbatical I took a weekly day of rest.
- After my sabbatical I took regular personal retreats.
- After my sabbatical I took extended periods of rest.