



SABBATH AS STRATEGY

A Research-Based Guide to Rest That Strengthens Ministry



A FLOURISHING IN MINISTRY RESOURCE



INTRODUCTION: THE IRONY OF PASTORAL REST

There's an uncomfortable irony at the heart of ministry: pastors preach about Sabbath and rarely practice it.

The day most Christians consider their rest day is, for ministry leaders, often the most demanding day of the week. Sunday involves early mornings, public speaking, emotional availability, conflict navigation, and relational engagement from start to finish. By Sunday evening, you're not rested—you're depleted.

And yet the research is unambiguous: Sabbath practice is one of the strongest predictors of long-term ministry sustainability. Clergy who practice regular Sabbath show measurably better outcomes across nearly every dimension of wellbeing.

This guide isn't a guilt trip about rest. It's a strategic resource for ministry leaders who want to last. The research tells us what works. This guide translates that research into practice.

PART 1: WHAT THE RESEARCH ACTUALLY SHOWS

The Duke Clergy Health Initiative Findings

The Duke Clergy Health Initiative has produced some of the most rigorous research on pastoral sustainability. Their findings on Sabbath are striking:

43% of clergy studied were not keeping a regular Sabbath. Not “struggling to maintain it” or “occasionally missing it”—not practicing it at all.

Among those who do practice regular Sabbath, the research shows significant differences:

- **Greater spiritual wellbeing.** Clergy who rest report deeper connection to God, more meaningful prayer lives, and greater sense of spiritual vitality.
- **Better mental health.** Regular Sabbath practitioners show lower rates of depression, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion.
- **Higher ministry satisfaction.** Rest creates space to remember why you entered ministry. Those who practice Sabbath report finding more joy and meaning in their work.
- **More sustainable long-term patterns.** Sabbath-keepers are more likely to remain in ministry long-term and less likely to experience burnout-related exits.

These aren't small differences. The gap between those who practice regular Sabbath and those who don't is one of the largest predictors of ministry flourishing in the research.

The Flourishing in Ministry Research

The Flourishing in Ministry project, which has tracked over 20,000 ministry leaders across more than a decade of research, confirms and extends these findings.

The research identifies Daily Wellbeing as a foundational dimension of flourishing—the base upon which all other dimensions depend. Within Daily Wellbeing, Sabbath emerges as one of the most powerful practices available.

Here's why: Daily Wellbeing isn't just about isolated habits like sleep or exercise. It's about sustainable

rhythms that allow for genuine recovery. Without regular, protected rest, the small daily practices eventually collapse under accumulated strain.

Think of it this way: you can eat well, exercise, and sleep seven hours a night, but if you never have a full day of genuine rest, you're running a deficit that compounds over time. The weekly rhythm of Sabbath addresses what daily practices can't.

Why Rest Is Ministry Infrastructure

The research challenges a common assumption: that rest is what you do after the real work is done.

In reality, rest IS part of the work. It's ministry infrastructure—as essential as sermon preparation, as strategic as leadership development.

Consider what happens without it:

- **Cognitive capacity degrades.** Decision-making quality suffers. Creativity diminishes. You're operating on diminished mental resources.
- **Emotional reserves deplete.** The pastoral presence that ministry requires becomes harder to sustain. You have less patience, less empathy, less capacity for the emotional labor ministry demands.
- **Spiritual vitality erodes.** The well runs dry. You're pouring out without being filled. Ministry becomes mechanical rather than Spirit-led.
- **Relational capacity shrinks.** You have less to give your family, your friends, your congregation. The relationships that sustain you suffer.

None of these failures are dramatic. They're gradual. Which is why they're so dangerous—by the time you notice, significant damage has accumulated.



PART 2: WHY MINISTRY LEADERS DON'T REST

Understanding the barriers to Sabbath is essential for overcoming them. The research identifies several common patterns.

The Structural Challenge

For pastors, Sunday isn't restful—it's the most demanding day of the week. This creates a structural problem that other professionals don't face. Your work week includes the day most people rest.

This means Sabbath for ministry leaders must happen on a different day. Monday is common, though some prefer Friday or Saturday. The specific day matters less than the consistency.

The Guilt Barrier

Many pastors feel guilty resting when others have needs. The phone might ring. Someone might be in crisis. The work is never "done" in any meaningful sense.

This guilt often has theological roots—a distorted understanding of sacrifice, availability, or servant leadership that equates constant availability with faithfulness.

But consider: even Jesus withdrew. He left crowds. He slept through storms. He prioritized time with the Father over immediate ministry demands. If the Son of God practiced rhythms of rest and withdrawal, perhaps constant availability isn't the standard of faithfulness we've made it.

The Identity Trap

For some ministry leaders, constant busyness has become identity. Being needed feels like being valued. Stopping feels like disappearing.

This is a warning sign. When your sense of worth depends on being indispensable, you've fused your identity with your function. Sabbath becomes threatening because it asks you to exist without producing.

The research on pastoral authenticity shows that this fusion is dangerous. Healthy ministry requires separating your worth from your work—and Sabbath is one of the most powerful practices for that separation.

The Practical Obstacles

Sometimes the barriers are simply logistical:

- **Family demands.** Your day off might be your spouse's workday, or filled with children's activities.
- **Bivocational ministry.** If you work another job alongside ministry, there may genuinely be no full day available.
- **Solo pastoring.** Without staff, everything falls on you. There's no one to cover.
- **Congregational expectations.** Some church cultures expect the pastor to be always available. Taking a day off feels like inviting criticism.

These are real obstacles. They're also solvable—but they require intention, communication, and sometimes difficult conversations.



PART 3: WHAT SABBATH ACTUALLY IS (AND ISN'T)

Sabbath Is Not Just “Time Off”

Time off can be spent running errands, catching up on household tasks, or scrolling social media. None of that is Sabbath.

Sabbath is intentional cessation from work—including the mental work of thinking about work—for the purpose of rest, restoration, and reconnection with God, self, and others.

The Hebrew word *shabbat* means “to cease, to stop.” It implies a full stop, not a pause. Sabbath isn’t doing different work; it’s stopping work altogether.

Sabbath Is Not Legalism

Sabbath isn’t about earning God’s favor or checking a religious box. It’s not about rigid rules that create anxiety rather than rest.

Jesus criticized the Pharisees for making Sabbath a burden rather than a gift. “The Sabbath was made for man,” he said, “not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Sabbath exists for human flourishing, not human performance.

This means your Sabbath should actually be restful—for you specifically. What restores you may differ from what restores someone else.

Sabbath Is Prophetic

In a culture of constant productivity, hustle, and availability, Sabbath is a counter-cultural declaration: you are not what you produce. Your worth is not measured by your output. You are beloved before you accomplish anything.

For ministry leaders, this is particularly important. The metrics of ministry success—attendance, giving, growth—can become idols that drive constant striving. Sabbath interrupts the striving and reminds you: the kingdom doesn’t depend on your exhaustion.

Sabbath Is Trustful

Practicing Sabbath requires trusting that the world will continue without your involvement. Trusting that God is sovereign. Trusting that your congregation can survive one day without your availability.

This is harder than it sounds. Many pastors have a savior complex—a subtle belief that everything depends on them. Sabbath confronts that belief weekly. Can you stop and trust that God is still working?

PART 4: BUILDING A SABBATH PRACTICE

Step 1: Choose Your Day

For most pastors, Sunday isn’t an option. Consider:

- **Monday** works well if Sunday depletes you. You rest immediately after your hardest day.
- **Friday** allows you to enter Sunday rested rather than depleted.
- **Saturday** maintains the traditional rhythm but may conflict with church events.

The specific day matters less than protecting it consistently. Choose a day that’s actually feasible given your schedule and your family’s needs.

Step 2: Define Your Boundaries

What counts as “work” for you? Consider:

- **Email and phone.** Will you check them? Many find that even looking at work communication pulls them back into work mentally. Consider leaving your phone home or using “do not disturb” settings.
- **Sermon preparation.** This is work, even if it feels spiritual. Save it for another day.
- **Church-related conversations.** If you run into a church member, can you keep it brief and non-work-focused?
- **Administrative tasks.** Obviously work. Not Sabbath.
- **Household tasks.** Some find these restful; others find them depleting. Know yourself.

The goal is genuine rest—mental, emotional, and physical. Define boundaries that actually create that rest for you.

Connection. If your work is lonely, being with people who don't need anything from you—friends, family, community—may be restorative.

Physical activity. A long walk, a hike, gardening, sports. Your body was designed to move, and movement can be deeply restful for the mind.

Creative pursuits. Making music, art, cooking, building. Engaging your creativity in non-work ways can be profoundly restorative.

Sleep. Sometimes what you need most is simply more rest. A nap. A late morning. Honoring your body's need for recovery.

Play. Activities with no purpose other than enjoyment. Games, hobbies, exploration. Play is not childish—it's humanizing.

Be specific. "Rest" is too vague. "I will spend the morning reading in the backyard, then have lunch with my spouse, then take a nap" is a plan.

Step 3: Define What Restores You

Sabbath isn't just about stopping; it's about starting something life-giving. What actually restores you?

Solitude. If your work is constantly relational, solitude may be deeply restful. Time alone with God, with a book, with your own thoughts.

Connection. If your work is lonely, being with people who don't need anything from you—friends, family, community—may be restorative.

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Step 4: Communicate and Protect

Sabbath requires communication with others:

- **Your family.** How will Sabbath work for your household? Can it be a shared rhythm?
- **Your staff.** Who covers emergencies? What constitutes an actual emergency?
- **Your congregation.** They need to know you have a day off. Most will respect it if you're clear. Those who don't may need pastoral education about sustainability.

Then protect it. Put it in your calendar like any other commitment. When requests come in, your default answer for that day is "no" or "let me get back to you tomorrow."

Step 5: Start Where You Are

If you're in the 43% who aren't practicing Sabbath at all, don't try to implement a perfect rhythm immediately.

Start with half a day. Four hours of genuinely protected rest. See what it feels like. Notice what obstacles arise. Adjust.

Then expand. Move toward a full day. Build the muscle of stopping.

If life circumstances genuinely prevent a full day, something is better than nothing. A Sabbath rhythm of half-days, or even regular Sabbath hours, still provides benefit—even if it's not ideal.

PART 5: COMMON OBSTACLES AND HOW TO ADDRESS THEM

“I can’t take a full day—I’m bivocational.”

This is a real constraint. If you’re working another job, a full Sabbath day may not be possible.

Consider: Can you protect Sabbath hours rather than a full day? Can you take a longer Sabbath once a month or quarterly? Can you sabbath in seasons—more rest during slower ministry seasons, less during intense ones?

Also consider: Is bivocational ministry sustainable for you long-term? Sometimes the answer is yes; sometimes it’s a transition that needs to end for your health.

“My congregation expects constant availability.”

This expectation may be real, but it’s not healthy—for you or for them.

Educating your congregation about pastoral sustainability is a gift to them. They don’t want a burned-out pastor. They may not realize what their expectations cost you.

Some practical approaches:

- Preach about Sabbath. Model it publicly.
- Train lay leaders to handle routine matters on your day off.
- Define what constitutes a genuine emergency (it’s less than people think).
- Communicate clearly and repeatedly about your rhythms.

Change may be gradual. Start the conversation rather than waiting until you crash.

“There’s too much to do.”

There will always be too much to do. Ministry is structurally open-ended. The work is never “done.”

This means you’re not waiting for a calm season to start Sabbath—that season isn’t coming. You’re practicing Sabbath in the midst of unfinished work, trusting that God is bigger than your productivity.

The counterintuitive reality: Sabbath often makes you more productive, not less. Rested leaders think more clearly, work more efficiently, and avoid the diminishing returns of exhaustion.

“My spouse works on my day off.”

This requires negotiation. Some options:

- Take a Sabbath that’s partly alone (morning) and partly together (evening).
- Choose a different day that works better for shared rest.
- Take a solo Sabbath and prioritize other rhythms for couple connection.

The perfect shouldn’t be the enemy of the good. Find a rhythm that works for your actual life, not an idealized version.

“I feel guilty when I’m not working.”

This guilt is information—probably about identity fusion, people-pleasing, or theological distortions around sacrifice.

Pay attention to it. Journal about it. Talk to a counselor or spiritual director. The guilt is telling you something about what’s driving you, and that’s worth understanding.

In the meantime, practice Sabbath anyway. You don’t have to feel great about it initially. The feelings often follow the practice, not the other way around.



PART 6: SABBATH AND THE FIVE DIMENSIONS OF FLOURISHING

The Flourishing in Ministry model identifies five dimensions of wellbeing. Sabbath touches all of them.

Daily Wellbeing

Sabbath is foundational to Daily Wellbeing—the base upon which other dimensions depend. Without regular, protected rest, the small daily practices eventually collapse. Sabbath provides the deep recovery that daily sleep and exercise can't fully provide.

Resilience

Resilience isn't just about being tough; it's about having capacity to absorb difficulty and bounce forward. Sabbath builds that capacity. Ministry leaders who rest have deeper reserves when crisis hits. Those running on empty have nothing left when things get hard.

Thriving

Thriving requires energy and engagement—the opposite of depletion. Sabbath creates space for genuine joy, creativity, and meaning to emerge. You can't thrive while running on fumes. Rest makes thriving possible.

Authenticity

Sabbath confronts the temptation to fuse identity with productivity. When you stop working and still exist, you're reminded that you are more than what you produce. This supports the authenticity dimension—being a whole person, not just a pastoral function.

Relational Ecosystem

Sabbath creates space for relationships that aren't about ministry—time with family, friends, and God without agenda. These relationships are essential to the relational ecosystem that sustains you. Ministry leaders who Sabbath often report deeper connections with the people who matter most.



PART 7: A SABBATH PLANNING WORKSHEET

Use this worksheet to design your own Sabbath practice.

My Sabbath day will be: _____

On this day, I will NOT:

Check email: Yes / No

Check phone: Yes / No / Only emergencies

Do sermon preparation: Yes / No

Do administrative work: Yes / No

Have church-related conversations: Yes / No

Other: _____

On this day, I WILL: (List specific activities that restore you)

Who needs to know about my Sabbath?

Family:

Staff:

Congregation:

Who will cover genuine emergencies?

What does “emergency” mean?

My first step this week:



CONCLUSION: REST AS WITNESS

Sabbath isn't just self-care. It's proclamation.

In a culture that equates worth with productivity, your rest declares: there is a God, and you are not him. The kingdom doesn't depend on your exhaustion. You are beloved before you produce anything.

Your congregation needs to see a pastor who rests. They're watching how you live, not just what you preach. When you practice Sabbath, you give them permission to do the same.

And you position yourself for decades of fruitful ministry rather than a few intense years followed by burnout.

The research is clear. The theology is ancient. The practice is yours to build.

Rest isn't a luxury. It's ministry infrastructure. It's strategic. It's essential.

Start this week.

Sources:

Duke Clergy Health Initiative
Flourishing in Ministry Research, Notre Dame
Bloom, M. Wellbeing at Work Program

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