

## Establishing an Annual Study Break

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*We often hear about pastors' need for vacation time. We sometimes hear about the possibility of granting a pastor a Sabbatical. There is a third provision that can be a significant source of both refreshment and improved productivity for a pastor—an annual Study Break. Cal Rychener shares about the value of such a provision, with some guidelines for structuring a four-week block in (preferably) the summer months, that is given the pastor in addition to any vacation time or Sabbatical provision.*

First off, let me advocate for keeping your family vacation times separate from study break time or even Sabbatical time. I found early in my ministry that I was taking time away from my family vacation to prepare messages, read, do sermon planning and such. This wasn't fair to my wife or kids, so I've tried to make a distinction between these times in order to protect both my family time and my study time. In other words...

- When I go on study break, I go there alone for several weeks.
- When I go on vacation, I leave my work behind and focus on my family.
- A Sabbatical combines a bit of both.

So just some suggestions about how to put together an annual Study Break. I would encourage you to break the Study Break into 3 distinct parts:

- 1) Rest time
- 2) Refocus time
- 3) Reentry time

### 1. Rest time

Take the first week to be with your family and just have the time of your life. Rest your mind, relax your pace, break from the grind of ministry and just have fun with your family doing whatever would help you rest and refuel with a little bit of fun. Knowing that you have some refocus time planned for ministry should help you to set your mind at ease and relax for a little while.

### 2. Refocus time

Take the next two weeks somewhere alone for just you and God time! This may seem like a big challenge for your family, particularly if you have young kids, but I found it always helped if my wife could get away to her parents' home or plan something fun with the kids. And it always helped if the kids knew that we had more fun time planned at the end of break (like we were going camping or something like that). So give yourself permission to take this time away if at all possible (find a cheap cabin at a campground or see if someone has a lake cottage you can use to get away).

Then I would always wrap my time around what I called PROPS time:

- Prayer
- Reading

- Organization
- Planning
- Study

Some days I did 2 hours in each of the 5 categories. Other days, I did blocks of time like:

- 7:00-8:00—Prayer time
- 8:00 -Noon—Reading time
- Noon to 1:30—Workout time
- 2:00-6:00—Sermon Prep time
- 7:00-10:00—Project time (I might be putting together devotionals for an upcoming prayer or fasting focus)

Again, organize this segment according to what feels the most pressing and would create the greatest sense of satisfaction if you gained some clarity around it. A lot of times I would just take the first couple days of my study break time to just read some books I was eager to get at, or listen to some messages or cd's that were begging for my attention. I found that if I first filled my mind and heart with great material, all of sudden I was getting creative thought for what I could do in my ministry. But block out time for organization and planning as well. I would give a block of time for planning my own personal schedule:

- What works best for me at work and home?
- What changes do I need to make with my own schedule to keep my heart, my marriage and my ministry healthy?

Then too, give yourself a block or two for vision time:

- What's on my heart for the church?
- What direction or initiatives do I sense we need to pursue in this next season of ministry?
- What changes do we need to make?
- What do we need to let go of?
- Who do we need to hire?
- Where are there problems that need to be addressed?

And always, I would make sure I had plenty of blocks of times for mapping out the next 9-12 months of sermon planning (with particular focus over the next 6 months). I would first lay out the series topics I wanted to do (particular topics that were burning on my heart along with topics I knew the church needed to hear). I would break these into Bring, Build, and Balance type messages.

- Starting in September when people are getting back into the routine, I would do messages with a high BRING value and really challenge the church to bring their friends. (Maybe a marriage, parenting or felt needs series of some kind).
- Then October-November would be BUIILD, here you could do more of Bible book/topic study: something to build the congregation in their faith.
- December would be high BRING value wrapped around Christmas and whatever programming you were going to do there.

- We always used January as a BUILD time (incorporating fasting and prayer into the New Year).
- February was BRING time.
- Followed by March/ April BUILD time.
- But always with a high BRING series starting on Easter to catch the Easter crowd.
- Then by the time we got into the summer months, we would plan a BALANCE series: here's where we would do topics like heaven-hell; maybe political issues, and give ourselves a lot of flexibility.

But that said, I wanted to go home from my study break with most of these series identified, with the titles of the series and messages pretty well mapped out and with something of a summary of how I planned to outline the message. Then I would take my programming team through the plan so they had plenty of time to be thinking of creative ideas for the programming/music side of these weekends. You don't have to have everything in stone, particularly the further out you've planned. But in my personal schedule, I would make time about 6 weeks in front of each new series, to break away for about a half day of further planning and just make sure my heart was still resonating with that series and then I would flesh it out further. Also, if you know several months in advance what you're planning on preaching, you can then be reading books and listening to other messages, reading articles, etc., and filing the best of what you've learned so that when it comes time to put those messages together, you've already filled your mental tank with lots of good material.

### 3. Reentry time

Now it's time to think about entering back into the routine; but before you do, spend another week with your family having some fun somewhere. Thank them for giving you this time away. Talk to them about some of the things you've learned. Speak into some of the things you sense God has shown you and particularly anything he has shown you concerning your family, your marriage. Talk about some of the exciting plans you've made for great vacations/family time you want to have this year. Again, don't focus on work so much as you just focus on your family, enjoying this time and feeling enriched together.