

Pastor Matt's Sabbatical Report to the Congregation:

Grace and peace be yours in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Thank you once again for granting me this sabbatical. It has been greatly refreshing, and I am very ready to be back among the good people of Forestgate.

I've produced a longer report for the Session, and during this time, I've written a few documents, which may simply be for my benefit. One of my main goals was to grow in spiritual maturity during my time away. I did that in part by studying the concept of differentiation, "the ability to remain connected in relationship to significant people in our lives and yet not have our reactions and behavior determined by them."¹ In short, I wanted to work on pleasing God more than I please other people, because the latter is a moving target and because the best way to serve others is to help them serve the Lord who standards are unchanging and whose grace is boundless and free. (A very good book puts it this way: "The fear of the Lord simplifies life."²)

How did I do that? I spoke to many pastors (formally interviewing some). I read (and skimmed) many books. I met with a mentor regularly. I reflected, I journaled (a little), and I exercised. Finally, I wrote myself clear, as Alistair Begg likes to say.

Along the way, I took my family on a vacation we had previously delayed. I took a business trip to General Assembly (the PCA's convention/business meeting), where I also networked for the sake of Assistant Pastor Search Committee. I also discussed with my wife how we can best serve Forestgate in our next season of ministry. I spent far more time being sick than I would have cared for, but I suppose that also forced me to slow down.

I spent minimal time communicating with staff and session, by design, because we had discussed most plans ahead of time. I hope that this was encouraging to them and the trust that we all have in their leadership. I hope it was beneficial to you, tangibly seeing the ways that God provides all of our needs and more, even during unusual seasons. And I trust that it accomplished in me the purpose we hoped for when we began planning this sabbatical before any of us had even heard the word COVID. As I wrote to the Session in my Sabbatical plan, "It has been an honor to serve as your pastor, and I am grateful for your forethought in granting me this time to refresh and recharge in the hopes of future fruitfulness at Forestgate." One author says that this way: "We strategically rest in order to vigorously keep going." Why do pastors need sabbaticals? Because we are finite, and we are sinful (yet redeemed). That won't change on the other side of sabbatical, but I hope this time has taught me to better depend on God's grace amidst my finitude and my failings.

I'm grateful for this time. I'm grateful that this time has come to end. I'm ready to be back at Forestgate, and so is my family. One Sunday this summer, we left a church that shall remain nameless only for one of our kids to say, "I miss Forestgate." Indeed, let's fix that very soon.

¹ Creech, Herrington, and Taylor, *The Leader's Journey*, 18.

² Welch, *When People Are Big and God Is Small*, 228.