Sabbatical Proposal

David Weber 2024

**Introduction:**

In pursuit of rootedness and renewal, I propose a year of intentional return to the places and practices of our Reformed liturgical heritage. This plan incorporates several elements that integrate personal study and prayer, family connection, and congregational involvement. During the 2024 year, I will study the liturgical roots of our church, travel with my family to Europe to explore the cities connected with our Reformed liturgical history, and lead the congregation toward a greater appreciation and knowledge of why we engage in our liturgical practices.

**Rationale:**

Rivermont Evangelical Presbyterian Church is distinctive within our denomination as a purposefully liturgical church. Our Sunday liturgy is formed by elements from the Reformed tradition beginning with Calvin’s Genevan liturgy and integrating both Anglican and Presbyterian traditions. Since there are few churches in our community that combine an evangelical faith with liturgical worship there is a continual need to explain and revive the prayers, creeds, and hymns of our service. This theme of the sabbatical study incorporates one of the key elements of our mission, as well as, one of our core values as a church, rooted worship.

**Outline:**

To bring about renewal to our unique identity without abandoning our rootedness in historic liturgy we need to explore the “why” behind our practices. The first element in pursuit of this renewal is intentional study and prayer. The second element is a time of rest and connection with family. This time of rest will include a twelve-week leave from church duties in which I will travel through Europe with my family. The third element is an integration of the fruit of study, travel, and reflection into the liturgical practices of our family and church. The sabbatical year will be divided into three distinct time blocks roughly correlating to the three main goals outlined above.

**Study and Prayer**

The first season of my sabbatical year will focus on study and prayer. The preaching schedule has been amended to give more time away from the pulpit. This lighter preaching load will give me time to pursue a deeper knowledge of our church liturgy. My journey will begin with an extended interview with Pastor Emeritus, Rev. Lowell Sykes. Under his ministry Rivermont returned to a more traditionally Reformed worship practice. While most churches were trending toward contemporary worship Rev. Sykes returned the church to her traditional roots. My aim is to understand what motivated him to lead the church in this direction, where he found inspiration for this move, and what resources he used to develop the elements we currently practice.

During this time of study, I will also read relevant works on the Reformed liturgical tradition. These books will include source material from prayer books, psalters, and hymnals, as well as, secondary sources on the history and development of the Western liturgical tradition. Four important works that will be included in my study are *Liturgies of the Western Church* by Bard Thompson, *Worship* by Hughes Oliphant Old, *Evangelical versus Liturgical?: Defying a Dichotomy* by Melanie Ross, and *Family Worship: In the Bible, In History, and In Your Home* by Donald Whitney. The aim of reading these works is to provide the needed background for understanding our practices and explaining them to our congregation.

The third element of the study will include an intentional reorienting of perspective within my regular ministry duties. During my sabbatical year, I will fill the role of liturgist more often. I desire to participate in these services in a new way to gain a better understanding of the experience of leading liturgy.

**Travel and Connection**

The second season of the sabbatical year will be a nine-week tour of the major cities associated with our Reformed liturgical heritage. This tour will be designed to provide time to travel with family, reflect upon our past, and rest from the fast-paced schedule of a large family.

We plan to begin our time by flying into Brussels on May 30. We will stay in the Wallonia region of Belgium where I lived when I was in middle school. It was here that I came to faith and was baptized. We plan to visit the church where I first worshipped as a believer. We will also explore the region’s rich history and beautiful cathedrals. While in the area we will cross over into France and visit the city of Noyon where John Calvin was born and raised.

From Belgium, we will travel to the Alsace region of France. There we plan to visit the cities of Strasbourg and Heidelberg. Each of these cities played a major role in the development of our Reformed liturgical heritage. Strasbourg was the location of Martin Bucer’s reform work. During his exile from Geneva, Calvin learned under Bucer in Strasbourg and developed the framework for his Genevan liturgy.

Our next stop is the Canton of Bern in Switzerland. Here we plan to combine relaxation and continued exploration of our Reformed liturgical history. The cities of Bern, Zurich, and Geneva will all be within a day's trip distance from our accommodations. We plan to visit each of these cities to explore their unique Reformation heritage. Bern and Zurich were both influential in the development of Swiss Protestantism under the ministry of Ulrich Zwingli. Geneva was the center of Calvin’s Reformation work. Here we will take time to explore the historic sights connected with the Reformation and John Calvin’s ministry. We plan to tour the International Museum of the Reformation, reflect on the Reformation wall, and visit St. Peter’s Cathedral. However, our time will not only be occupied with museums but also with exploration and play. We will tour Lake Geneva, visit the resort town of Interlaken, and eat lots of Swiss chocolate and fondue. We look forward to hiking the Alps and swimming in the cool lakes of Switzerland as we spend time growing closer.

Next on our itinerary is Paris. The children have often heard about our honeymoon in Paris and have dreamed of going to see the major sights of this city. We will spend four days exploring the sights and experiences of Paris, including Notre Dame, the Ache de’ Triumph, the Effie Tower, and the Louvre.

The next stage of our travels will take us to the town of Canterbury, England. Canterbury has played a major role in the development of the English liturgical heritage. Here the Book of Common Prayer was written by Thomas Crammer and from here the Anglican Church has been led for centuries. We plan to visit the Canterbury Cathedral, rest in Eastbridge Hospital, and explore St. Augustine’s Abby. Each of these sites will provide further background and context for the liturgies we have adopted in the life of our family and church. Yet, like our time in Geneva, we plan to rest and play. We will punt along the channels of this ancient city, take time to picnic on the Dover coast, and explore the shops and towns surrounding this area. We will drink tea and eat clotted cream, and maybe find time for the adults to steal away and drink a pint in a local pub.

From Canterbury, we will travel to London for a few days of sightseeing. There we will visit the major attractions such as the Tower of London, Big Ben, and Buckingham Palace. We will also take time to explore Westminster Abby and beg to be let into the Jerusalem Chamber where the Westminster Confession of Faith was written. Our few days in London will conclude with a ride north to Edinburgh.

On this stop, we hope to connect to our Presbyterian heritage by exploring historic sites such as St. Giles’ Cathedral, where John Knox led the Scottish Reformation, and Edinburgh Castle. However, the majority of our time will be spent resting and exploring; hiking in the Scottish Highlands, touring Loch Ness, and taking in the beauty of the Royal Botanic Garden of Edinburgh.

For the final stage of our travels, we plan to visit the Netherlands. This last week of our travels will be slower-paced than the rest of our time. We will visit a few of the major sites in the Netherlands but focus most of our attention on relaxing, connecting, and reflecting. We will fly out of Brussels on August 1.

During this time of travel, we desire to slow the pace of our lives and connect with one another as we reflect upon the importance of faith, family, and fun. We will intentionally reengage in our family liturgical practices, taking time each morning and evening to pause and consider that we live all of life before God.

**Integration**

The final stage of the sabbatical year will be an integration of the fruit of my study, travel, and reflection. This time will result in several concrete benefits for our family and the church. First, I will take the lessons learned and develop a renewed family devotion liturgy, one that reflects our past but also incorporates the lessons of our summer of travel. Second, this integration will include reviewing our current church liturgy, rewriting our church’s guide to liturgical worship, incorporating the main points of application into our membership classes, developing a family worship workshop, and offering a Wednesday evening study, in the Spring of 2025, that will explore the benefits of our worship tradition. The sabbatical year will end on the final Sunday of the year in which I will preach a sermon that will reflect the major lessons learned and the fruit borne from this time.

**Logistics:**

***Preaching Duties:*** A preaching schedule has been developed that distributes the preaching duties evenly among the three other pastors. I will preach approximately 65% of the Sunday Services during the year, not including the twelve-week sabbatical leave period. However, I will also lead liturgy more often than during a regular year. A few highlights and benefits:

* Increased time of study and prayer.
* More personal experience leading liturgy.
* Each pastor will preach a one-month sermon series during the twelve-week leave period.
* Each pastor will gain increased experience preaching.

***Financing:*** A trip to Europe for a family of seven is a large expense. In anticipation for this time, we have been saving for several years. We will use these savings as the primary source of funding. We also plan to use the $3,000 that the session has set aside for sabbatical travel and some professional expense money (as available and applicable).

**Motion:**

In accordance with the church’s sabbatical policy, the Session with concurrence from the Personnel Committee approves the sabbatical proposal as outlined above including a twelve-week leave beginning May 20th, 2024, and ending August 12th, 2024.