



Community Evangelical Free Church

Biblical Truth ... Strong Relationships ... Practical Help

August 27, 2008

A letter from your Elder Board typically deals with an important topic. This letter is no exception. In it, we are counting on your support regarding a recent elder-board decision that we trust will benefit our pastors, our members, and the broader Christian community.

That decision involves our senior pastor's schedule over the next number of months.

We are blessed by God every week with superb preaching and faithful behind-the-scenes pastoral leadership. Steve's ministry shows faithfulness to the scriptures and to us, as do the other pastors.

The spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical stamina required of pastors over the long haul is substantial. They are able to take less time off weekly than most people, and generally invest two to five nights a week in ministry. In particular, the mantle of leadership is heavy on a senior pastor, both in and out of the pulpit. Men who serve well in responsible positions need an occasional respite. This is why our employment policy states, "Pastors will be granted a minimum of 3 months leave every 5 years of service."

It has been twelve years since Steve last took a sabbatical. Therefore, the elders have approved a six month professional leave for Steve, combined with some additional weeks to tackle a study-project the elders believe is timely for our church. His total time away from the pulpit will last eight months. It begins Monday, September 29, and ends Sunday, May 31. The breakdown looks like this:

- 6 months sabbatical (basically October through March)
- 3 weeks vacation (not a special accommodation, but part of his normal compensation package).
- 6 weeks of study investigating the New Testament on the role of women in the church (the final weeks leading up to May 31 — during this time Steve would attend elder meetings and teach Newcomers' Class, but remain out of the pulpit)

What are the benefits of this plan? First, it benefits our pastors. A sabbatical leave is an extension of the biblical concept of a Sabbath day, and Sabbath year, for renewal. It is not a vacation. It is a period in which a pastor continues serving God but in a different venue that he finds refreshing. The plan is for Steve to attempt a publishable manuscript of his sermon-series on Revelation. Steve loves to write; producing a book, although challenging, will be a welcome change. Arleigh, in turn, will have the opportunity to use his preaching gifts more extensively than normal by preaching most weeks while Steve is gone.

Second, a pastor's sabbatical benefits our congregation. We cannot help but benefit from a pastor whose batteries have been recharged. After Arleigh's sabbatical in 2000, we were all the richer for his returning more energized to his teaching and counseling.

Thirdly, this sabbatical will benefit the body of Christ at large. The book Steve co-authored with Joni during his sabbatical twelve years ago was translated into numerous foreign languages, and opened many doors for speaking, radio interviews, a small group study curriculum, and speaking opportunities far and near. Our hope is that a published work on the last two chapters of Revelation would have similar, if more modest, impact.

But is this a good year for Steve to be gone? The answer is, "Of course not." Neither were the last half-dozen years during which a sabbatical was repeatedly postponed due to major changes in the church staff, the multi-year search for an executive pastor, training new staffers in their first year, developing CEFC's Master Plan, and drafting CEFC's Ten Year Vision. In short, there is never a convenient year for a senior pastor to be absent. But the next half-year or so is when our Building Steering Committee will do much below-the-surface planning; they have received from Steve and the elders a good amount of what they need for that work. It will be months before plans can be shown to the congregation and a capital campaign started. Of all times during the next few years of drawings, fund-raising, and actual construction, we believe now is the best time for Steve's leave.

What is our part?

- Steve is pleading for our prayers. This is a very ambitious project to complete in six months when the sabbatical ends, finished or not. Two challenges in particular loom. First, an interesting book can't happen merely by transcribing sermon tapes; Steve tells us that a sermon which sang from the pulpit usually dies when put in print; a whole new approach is necessary. Secondly, gaps in Steve's understanding that went unnoticed in preaching these chapters will stand out when writing about them. Consider the theological issue that has proved so thorny in Revelation's final paragraphs (Judgment Day as it relates to Christians). He doubts he can fully come to terms with that issue before the sabbatical; time-consuming study remains to be done. Please pray often in your personal devotions and small groups.
- Send occasional notes of encouragement.
- Verna needs prayer to know how best to support him during this project.
- Arleigh would value your prayers for his important filling of the pulpit.

We elders commit to keeping you informed during these months.

By our providing this PRACTICAL HELP to a man we so deeply appreciate (thus showing STRONG RELATIONSHIPS), Steve will be able to supply BIBLICAL TRUTH to a much wider audience. These are the core values of our church as we move into the future. It is an excellent beginning to refresh our pastor as we begin the next stage of our life as a church.

Mike Rudolf
Elder Chairman