

September 28, 2021

Dear Westminster Session,

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus spoke about rest: “Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30, New Revised Standard Version).

Like music directors who mark the date in the margins of a hymnbook after the congregations sing a particular hymn, I write the date and sermon title in the margins of my Bible after preaching on a specific passage of scripture. Beside the Matthew 28 passage in my Bible, I noticed the following dates and sermon titles written in the margins of the page: July 22, 2018, "Prayer of Rest" and January 5, 2020, "Spiritual Rest." These worship series on prayer and holy rest were seasons of spiritual growth in my faith and, hopefully, in the faith of Westminster, where we collectively rested in the arms of Christ.

Almost two years ago, during the "Holy Rest Sermon Series," our congregation reflected on the seven different kinds of rest: physical, mental, spiritual, social, creative, sensory, and emotional. We discovered that rest is much more than sleep.

Holy rest is about connection to our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. As we rest in God's presence, we learn the compassionate ways of our Lord. We recognize the burdens we carry. We acknowledge the freedom given in mercy. We embrace new energy in the presence of Christ and help others feel the presence of Christ as well.

Recently, I meditated on Matthew 11:28-30 and found refreshment in these holy words of scripture. As stated in my call as pastor at Westminster and as required by the Shenandoah Presbytery after six years of service in a specific ministry position, I am requesting, from Westminster, time to rest. I hope to include the different kinds of rest during a fourteen-week sabbatical from May 30–September 5, 2022, which includes one week of vacation.

The sabbatical will provide intentional time for rest, along with renewal, mission, and spiritual growth. My sabbatical goals will explore new avenues of mission and social justice with family, in community, and at a conference. During the sabbatical, the congregation will participate in a church-wide project which correlates with the sabbatical's emphasis on mission and social justice.

Also, the sabbatical will provide time to celebrate our wedding anniversary and have a family vacation. Due to travel restraints in 2021, Reed and I look forward to celebrating our twenty-first wedding anniversary in Scotland. We will visit South Carolina for our annual family beach vacation during the one week of vacation included in the sabbatical.

Over the past six years at Westminster, the church has added funds to a sabbatical savings account. During the fourteen weeks of my sabbatical, funds from the sabbatical savings will compensate a person to provide pastoral leadership to Westminster. This person will hold office hours, preach, visit, teach, celebrate sacraments, officiate funerals and weddings, and lead the church-wide project. I am confident that following the upcoming year of planning with

leadership and listening to God's voice for a person to lead during the sabbatical, Westminster will thrive and grow during my time away.

Many of you may be asking the question, "What is a sabbatical?" This is a great question, and we can turn to scripture to find the answer. The word "sabbatical" means every seven years. In Genesis 2:23, God worked six days and rested on the seventh day. Additionally, scriptures, such as Leviticus 25, teach about the sabbath year, where the workers rested during the sabbath year, and the land rested as well. Scriptures such as these and the example of Jesus extending rest to his disciples and the crowd in the gospel of Matthew are only a few references in scripture regarding the Biblical foundation for taking sabbaticals. In recent times, a sabbatical is defined as an extended time away (two months to a year) from the career of an individual, especially a teacher, professor, or pastor, to achieve a goal such as research, writing, or renewal.

Several decades ago, the Shenandoah Presbytery noticed that many pastors were leaving their calls before ten years of service in the same church. Out of great concern for churches and pastors, they conducted a survey and determined that sabbaticals help pastors stay longer in their calls and avoid burnout in ministry. In 2003, the presbytery approved the Sabbatical Leave Policy, which requires sabbaticals in all new calls of installed pastors.

Several years ago, Westminster approved a sabbatical for a former pastor, but he accepted a call to another church and did not take the sabbatical. Although I am, hopefully, the first pastor to take a sabbatical at Westminster, this is not my first sabbatical. In 2014, I participated in a sabbatical during my call as Associate Pastor of Youth and Young Adults emphasizing rest, renewal, family time, and youth ministry. I interviewed youth pastors in Virginia, Georgia, and North Carolina. I learned the exciting ways the pastors were engaging youth in their faith for Christ. Still today, I teach from Augusta, Georgia's Roswell Presbyterian Church's confirmation curriculum.

During the 2014 sabbatical, our family traveled to Washington, D.C., where we stayed in a missionary's home, visited the National Zoo, and served in a soup kitchen. On Sundays, our family visited thirteen separate churches, which included worshipping in different states with various races and denominations. When I returned to the church after the sabbatical, I received one of the best compliments in ministry: Following a worship service, a member approached me and said, "April, you have grown spiritually."

Session, I am grateful for your leadership and look forward to God's future dreams and plans for Westminster. Please review the mission sabbatical proposal; let me know of any concerns, ideas, or questions. Sabbaticals provide rest and renewal for the pastor and the congregation. May next summer allow time for all of us to rest in God's presence, serve in mission, worship in truth, and grow in faith through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

Thank you for considering this sabbatical request.

Grace and Peace,

Rev. April H. Cranford