



Pastor Matt's Sabbatical Newsletter

As many of you know, I will soon be stepping away for a three-month sabbatical from October 1st through December 31st. This is a time that holds deep meaning both for me personally and for the life of our congregation. My sabbatical is not an extended vacation or a signal of uncertainty about my call here at First Pres. Instead, it is an intentional and purposeful season of rest, renewal, and reflection – endorsed by our session and grounded in the belief that healthy leadership requires space for restoration and growth. Some of you are familiar with sabbaticals, as they are prominent in not only pastoral fields of work but also within professional education, the legal field, and in some other settings. I am hopeful that this newsletter will provide helpful insights regardless of your familiarity with sabbaticals.

During this time, I will be working on two primary goals. First, I will be working and writing to make major strides toward completing my doctoral project for the Doctor of Ministry degree, which I have been pursuing for the last several years. This is the final stretch of a long journey of learning for me, and I'm excited to give this effort my full and focused energy. Second, and just as important, I have been instructed and encouraged to view a sabbatical as an intentional time to care for my mental, physical, and spiritual well-being. My hope is that this time apart will refresh and refocus me, so that I return with renewed clarity, energy, and vision for the next exciting and rich season of ministry we will share together.

A sabbatical, at its best, is a gift not just to the pastor but to the congregation, too. It's a way of investing in the future – ensuring that leadership remains healthy and vibrant, and that the work we do together continues to grow from a place of faithfulness, joy, and purpose. Thank you for your support during this time.

SABBATICAL PREACHING SCHEDULE

Oct. 5	Rev. Ann Schwartz (Lead Presbyter of Great Rivers Presbytery)
Oct. 12	Pastor Karol
Oct. 19	Beth MacDonald (Ruling Elder on Session)
Oct. 26	Pastor Karol
Nov. 2	Pastor Karol
Nov. 9	Matt Blue (Ruling Elder on Session)
Nov. 16	Curtis Trout (Ruling Elder on Session)
Nov. 23	Rev. Charlotte Hoffman (Senior Staff Chaplain at Carle Bromenn)
Nov. 30	Pastor Karol
Dec. 7	Kirk Sampson (Ruling Elder on Session)
Dec. 14	Pastor Karol
Dec. 21	Rev. Bob & Kristi Rice (Friends of FPC, former PC(USA) Mission Co-Workers)
Dec. 24	Pastor Karol
Dec. 28	Abby Briggs



DOCTORAL FOCUS

Several people have asked me what the focus of my doctoral project is and what I have been studying while pursuing my Doctor of Ministry (DMin) degree at Fuller Seminary. I have been enrolled in the Leading Change Doctor of Ministry cohort at Fuller. This program is facilitated by Tod Bolsinger, PhD, MDiv. Tod is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and an acclaimed author of books such as *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* and *Tempered Resilience: How Leaders Are Formed in the Crucible of Change*. This cohort degree program focuses on the definition, requirements, costs, practices, and heart of transformational leadership (for the leader as well as the community they serve) with an understanding that “the primary task of leadership is to energize a community of people toward their own transformation in order to meet the challenges of the uncharted terrain before them.”

The thesis of my doctoral project is specifically focused on the rediscovery of ordained identity and increasing the adaptive capacity of ruling elders and sessions within the PC(USA). I have shared several times in several places, including the pulpit, that I have and continue to invest a great deal of my time and energy into the development of our elders on session in becoming spiritual leaders within our congregation. The session, not the pastor(s), is the primary ruling and guiding body of a congregation in the PC(USA). My project asks and seeks to answer two questions: What is required to foster transformative leadership development within ruling elders? How might the congregation be enriched and transformed through the intentional and adaptive leadership of ruling elders?

I hope and intend to share the findings and final product of my doctoral project with all of you after I have defended it, graduated, and been conferred with my degree. My goal is to submit my project to the seminary faculty for review in the early months of the new year and then to defend it in the Spring. Hopefully, that will allow me to graduate in the late Spring and attend commencement in June.

LEADERSHIP & SUPPORT

I have been discerning a sabbatical for a few years. According to my terms of call, approved by the congregation, I was eligible to pursue a sabbatical about 3 years ago. As our congregation was navigating significant changes, ones both specific to our church and others broadly shared beyond our walls, I decided to hold off. Part of the reason for my decision was an uncertainty I held regarding leadership in my absence. I am thrilled to say that uncertainty is a thing of the past. While I am on sabbatical, Pastor Karol will serve as the Acting Head of Staff and the primary pastor. Pastor Karol's presence has been a significant factor in the peace I have regarding the ministry and faithfulness of our church while I am away. We have all had the opportunity to witness and be blessed by Karol's gifts and heart, and she has experience leading a congregation as a solo pastor before joining us here at First Pres.

Pastor Karol will also have support around her during my sabbatical. The session will be present for and with Karol, and as you hopefully noticed in the preaching schedule, several of our ruling elders on session will be sharing their faith and leadership behind the pulpit. Rev. Kathy Mitchell has also kindly and graciously agreed to step into a support role for pastoral and congregational care during my sabbatical. In addition, our fantastic and talented staff will continue to serve in their roles and work to ensure the thriving of our church.



WHAT ABOUT MATT?

There have been important and valid questions asked not only about what I will be doing during my sabbatical, but also where I will be and what, if any, contact I will have with First Pres during that time. You have heard me echo the powerful statement offered by Brené Brown: "Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind." Let me be clear: During my sabbatical, I will not be functioning as your pastor. I will not be preaching or teaching. I will not be serving or advocating as the head of staff. I will not be a pastoral care provider.

I hope and pray that my sincere affection for and commitment to all of you have been both demonstrated and felt in many ways during my time serving as your pastor. I sincerely mean it when I say I love this church. Pastor Karol and I have spoken about what I should be informed of during my sabbatical. She will communicate significant events to me, so I am aware and able to hold this family of faith - my family of faith - in my prayers. I believe it is also important for you to know that I will not be checking my church email account with regularity during my sabbatical. And again, I will not be functioning as your pastor during my sabbatical. This holds true even if any of our members pass away. If I am in town, it is very likely you will see me seated in the sanctuary during a memorial service (to offer my respects and to praise God for the life of someone I care about), but it will be Pastor Karol who officiates those services during my sabbatical.

That being said, if you see me around our community, please feel free to say hi! You don't have to pretend I don't exist or make attempts to stay out of my way. Even on sabbatical, I am still your neighbor. As such, I'll be thrilled to chat with you at the grocery store or catch up if I run into you at a Redbirds game. I plan to be home and in the area for most of my sabbatical. I am planning three trips to visit specific churches around the country that have sessions and elders currently practicing and embodying the very vision and hopes I have for my doctoral project. I will visit with those sessions and hopefully attend worship with them. The Sundays I am in town, I will be visiting local churches for worship.

Lastly, Caitlin, Isaac, and Levi will still be attending and sharing in the ministry and life of our church while I am on sabbatical. Isaac is absolutely stoked to now be in the youth group and can't wait to be in middle school Sunday school and to go to Sunday night youth group. Levi, if it isn't obvious every Sunday, believes the church is his second home. He loves it here. First Pres is not just where I work; it is my family's church home. If I may, I would appreciate it if not everyone asked Caitlin every Sunday how I am doing or what I am up to 😊. Thank you for loving my family and supporting me while I am away.



SUPPORTING PASTOR MATT IN HIS SABBATICAL JOURNEY

FROM: ROB KELLEY, PERSONNEL COMMITTEE CHAIR; JULIE KOH,
ELDER; AND SABRINA SMITH, CLERK OF SESSION

We are deeply grateful for Pastor Matt's faithful leadership, tireless service, and unwavering dedication to First Presbyterian Church of Normal. His shepherding has blessed our congregation in countless ways, and we are thankful for his commitment to guiding us in faith.

The terms of call for Pastor Matt, approved by our congregation, include three months of sabbatical leave for every six years of service to First Pres. This coming October, Pastor Matt will begin a three-month sabbatical — a time set apart for study and renewal. We firmly support this important step, as Pastor Matt continues his doctoral studies and takes intentional time to recharge spiritually and physically.

While many of us may not see it firsthand, being a pastor is truly a 24-hour-a-day calling. The demands of preaching, counseling, leading, visiting, and responding to the unexpected are constant. A sabbatical offers a pastor the rare gift of uninterrupted time — time to focus deeply on study, reflect on ministry, and seek God's guidance for the future. During these three months, we have complete faith in Pastor Karol, who will serve as Acting Head of Staff. She is fully prepared to lead our church with wisdom and care. To allow Pastor Matt the full benefit of this sabbatical, we ask that all church communications that would typically be intended for him be directed to Pastor Karol instead. This will help ensure that Pastor Matt is truly relieved of First Pres responsibilities during this time.

We also ask for your continued prayers—for Pastor Matt, for Pastor Karol, for our dedicated staff, and for our whole church family—as we journey through this sabbatical season together.

We believe this time will be a blessing not only for Pastor Matt but also for our church, as we are reminded that ministry is shared among many gifted leaders and members. Let us embrace this season with joy, support, and anticipation for all that God will continue to do in and through us.