

A sabbatical for the dean: A creative example

By *Steven Schweitzer*

There is an old joke (or, perhaps, a warning) I was told when I was considering becoming a dean: “The first year, you stop writing. The second, you stop reading. The third, you stop thinking.”

It is easy for those in the role of dean to neglect reading, writing, scholarship, and eventually their own self-care. Deans can become absorbed by the work, the details, the reports, the endless emails that need replies, and the increasing demands on their time and focus. While most deans still teach courses, finding time for research, rejuvenation, and vocational development can be difficult. But, it doesn’t have to be this way. Deans should have a sabbatical.

Must one sacrifice scholarship or personal and professional development and simply forfeit sabbatical time during the years of service as dean? No, the years as dean should include opportunities for sabbatical. Many schools, and even their deans, may say, “But, I [the dean] cannot be away from the office for an entire semester! I’d spend the whole next semester on my return simply trying to find my desk. I’d never recover from a semester away. It simply won’t work. So, I’ll just have to give up my sabbatical.” That can lead to burn out, to resentment, and to an ineffective dean.

I want to share my experience of a “creative, staggered sabbatical” as an alternative. It may not work for everyone or every school, but it is a success for me and for my institution. Perhaps it, or a version of it, could work for others.

In making the shift in summer 2009 from another institution to become academic dean at Bethany Theological Seminary, I was giving up an opportunity for a sabbatical at my former school, and I didn’t want to lose that privilege and the time for my research and writing. So as

part of my contract, I negotiated that I would be eligible for a sabbatical in the third year of my service as dean, in the 2011–12 academic year.

As with many institutions, Bethany has a lot going on right now: We are implementing practices for assessment of academic programs and student learning. Our board approved a new strategic plan in fall 2009, and we started a financial campaign in summer 2010. Additionally, we began a curriculum review in fall 2010 and plan to have the new programs in place for fall 2013. Needless to say, many important things require attention.

How could I, as dean, take a sabbatical in the midst of all this and still keep our momentum moving forward? While we could have asked one of our faculty members who had previously served as acting dean to resume that role again, this would have caused another series of problems to solve. I proposed another solution to the president to see if it could work.

I had no elaborate travel plans for my sabbatical. I had writing projects I wanted to finish and more research projects to begin. I also wanted to spend part of my time reflecting on the vocation of being dean. I see myself both in the role of a teaching faculty member who works in Hebrew Bible and as a dean who works intentionally to develop my understanding of “thinking, being, doing” as a dean. Both aspects of my position are my vocation, my call; I should not need to sacrifice being a scholar or an effective teacher to be dean, and I should not need to sacrifice being an effective dean to pursue my scholarly interests in the field of Hebrew Bible.¹ Perhaps wanting to be attentive to both of these aspects of my identity is why I currently serve as cochair of a Section for the Society of Biblical Literature and as a member of the CAOS Steering Committee. I believe that both of these groups have necessary roles to play in professional development, both for myself and for others.



My idea of how to make a sabbatical work: take the allotted time for the sabbatical by spreading it out in two- to three-week intervals over the entire year. Our institutional policy allows for four months of sabbatical time, which I am taking as sixteen weeks this academic year, but not all at once.

The details

In conversation with the president, I identified the targeted sixteen weeks, making sure to be present on campus for major events and for key times in our institutional life (such as board meetings, budget planning, our Presidential Forum, and certain denominational responsibilities). With this sketched out, we asked the faculty member who had previously served as acting dean to consider doing so again, but only for those designated weeks. As compensation for this shift in responsibility, we agreed to provide one course release and contracted an

adjunct who had taught before to teach again that Introduction to the New Testament online course. That is the extent of the cost to the institution for my sabbatical.

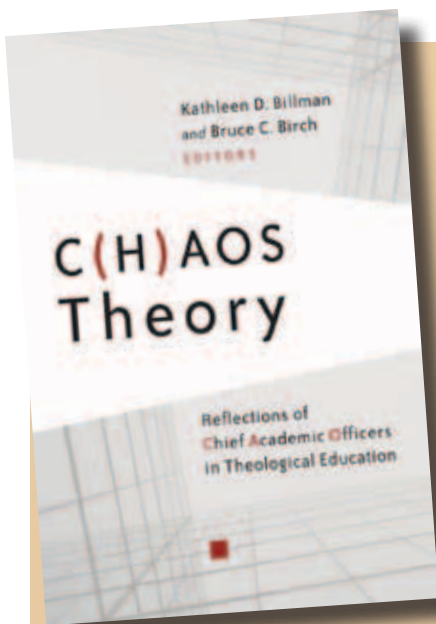
Besides having a capable colleague willing to serve the institution this way, the success of this experiment depends heavily on my administrative assistant. She is efficient, reliable, well-organized, able to identify problems and suggest solutions, and able somehow to “keep all the balls in the air.” This scenario is made much easier having someone of her caliber in that crucial role.

With the support of the president, my sabbatical proposal for 2011–12 went to our board in fall 2010 for approval (sabbaticals must be approved one year in advance). Board members affirmed my intentions and the proposed plan. They were slightly concerned about the integrity of the sabbatical—that I would be able to disconnect and would “actually be on sabbatical”—but they saw this as something that would

be beneficial both to the institution and to me. They were willing to think creatively about how this could work.

By March 2012, I had taken eight of my sixteen weeks. During those eight weeks, I was able to disconnect effectively, enjoy my sabbatical time, and be productive. I had a private carrel in the library, where I spent my time. During those weeks, I completed three writing projects: I wrote and submitted two invited essays on different aspects of the Book of Chronicles for collected volumes, and I secured a book contract for a commentary on Ezra-Nehemiah after writing and submitting a sample chapter to the series' editorial board. In addition, I read, read, and read some more—something that gave me great satisfaction. I also engaged in prayer and personal retreat. I found renewal and more vocational clarity. I was able to spend more time with my family.

I could not have done this without the support of my institution, from the president and other key administrators, from faculty members who affirmed the value of my sabbatical and particularly my scholarship, from my administrative assistant, and from the board members who were willing to try something new.



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In the recently-published *C(H)AOS Theory: Reflections of Chief Academic Officers in Theological Education*, long-time dean Bruce Birch writes this advice to deans:

Give yourself time away from the role of dean. This is particularly important after a time of crisis or unusual pressure. Take the vacation time you are due. Observe your own personal patterns of renewal week to week even when crisis looms. Consider negotiating short sabbaticals from the office (one to four months) from time to time. Most deans end up missing sabbaticals they would otherwise have taken as faculty members, so asking for some shorter times is not out of the question.²

I couldn't agree more. Our institutions need effective deans. Sabbaticals are a valuable part of the life of the dean.

I'm not saying that every institution should do what we did (they shouldn't!). This arrangement worked for me and for Bethany. I hope that in sharing this idea about a creative sabbatical that other institutions might be willing to "think outside of the box," which may allow deans who wouldn't get a full-semester sabbatical to still have one, though in a different form. So, ask at your institution, "how can the dean (or other administrators, too) have a productive sabbatical?" There is freedom to try new things. They just might work! ♦

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ENDNOTES

1. I have been tremendously helped in this area by my participation in the first Colloquy for Theological School Deans sponsored by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion. The conversations around the "vocation of being dean" have been invaluable to me, especially as someone hired to be dean with no fixed number of years of service—there is also no spot on the teaching faculty guaranteed for me when I no longer serve as dean at Bethany, whenever that day eventually comes.
2. Bruce Birch, "Finding Wholeness in the Role of the Dean," in *C(H)AOS Theory: Reflections of Chief Academic Officers in Theological Education*, eds. K. D. Billman and B. C. Birch (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 389.