



Hawfields  
Presbyterian  
Church



A few images  
starting on p.5



Running  
chronology in the  
panels on the left  
of the pages

# Resting with Questions

SABBATICAL REPORT BY REV. DAVID EALY

## WEEK ONE: May 31st-June 6th

Celebrated *Memorial Day*  
Spent the week with my  
parents

Subbed preaching for my  
Dad preaching at *River Ridge  
Church*, Charleston, WV  
(I told my Dad, "Are you  
kidding me?!"; but he had  
taken ill and couldn't fulfill  
the commitment.)

## WEEK TWO: June 7th-13th

More time with my parents,  
helping them with house  
renovations

Visit with *Faith & Truth  
Apostolic Church*, Charleston,  
WV (online)

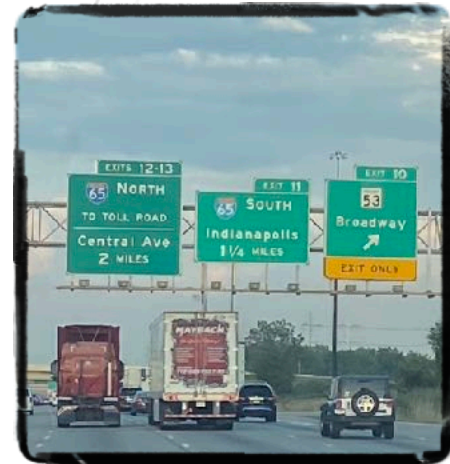
Visit with *Lamb's Chapel  
Church*, Burlington, NC (in-  
person)

## waking up

**What was most remarkable for me with this Sabbatical is what resting actually awakened in me.**

So, not all roads are equal. I have no intention to be egalitarian about the value of one road of learning or another throughout this journey. By far the most valuable were the people I've had the privilege to engage along the way. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

While the Sabbatical started on Memorial Day, it really began with the covenant I made with Hawfields almost 11 years ago. Eleven. It's a beautifully creative tension to live with not believing how quickly the time seems to have passed while also being flooded with obvious signs of age: my body, our independent girls, my 22-year-old marriage, changes in local, state and national administrations, changes in weather, changes in mood, and most principally reflections on just how much has happened since I first sent the inquiry to the search committee in 2010. I still remember with great fondness those opening conversations and the hilariously clandestine visit Mandy (my wife) and I made on my birthday that year: a visit neither my then-current church nor Hawfields knew about. But God was not hiding from me on that visit.



This hotel was  
awesome!

## Lessons

All around Me

With the rest the Sabbatical provided, I found myself seeing more. Like the difference between looking out the window of a moving train versus a still one, the rest that the Sabbatical afforded slowed me to a stop, a real stop. The world looks very different when the breaths come deeper and slower.



Though a solitary experience, I couldn't have done this without my family's support.

Whether it was a chocolate birthday cake, cards, phone calls, video calls, random text messages, enforcing my information bubble, or just plain loving me, my family proved an integral part of making this Sabbatical happen.

Mandy (my wife) didn't stop working at Hawfields as their Church Educator just because I was gone. Natalie (our daughter) didn't cease serving as an Elder on the Session just because I was in a period of rest. And even though Rachel (our eldest) spent the majority of the time working this Summer, it didn't change her desire to ask me questions related to the Church like she always has. But they were very conscious and diligent about making sure that they (and I) didn't engage in business related to Hawfields. This was easier some days than others, but it



made me aware of how habitually we count on one another. It proved another area I needed to be mindful about not taking for granted. I thank the "women in my life" for making this experience so restorative and illuminating.

They weren't just practicing avoidance behavior. They were actively looking for ways to help me with creative

approaches to what I was learning and to reflect with me even when I was not home in person. I can't imagine this Sabbatical would have been as good for me without them.

As a special note, I am especially grateful for the "birthday in a box" they sent to me when we weren't going to be in the same space on July 3rd. I never felt too far from home because of them.

## Rev. Laura Becker

Pastor, Northminster PC, Chattanooga

"It was important for them to know that the church world would spin on without me...and it was important for ME to know that also."

— Reflecting on her Sabbatical

"On paper", there was no reason for me to be at this church. A demographically and theologically contrasting (with me anyway) congregation in a town in which we'd never lived. Yes, Mandy's sister lived relatively close by, but that really didn't factor into our thinking. Where did God want me (want us) to be serving? As we walked through the halls, talked about the grounds, took in the Sanctuary, looked at the Manse, sat through Saturday night worship, and engaged about the people of the congregation, I found myself swelling with something I never saw coming: love. As cheesy as it may sound, I fell in love with the church on that visit. And everyday since has seen small and large reinforcements for that love. I think of Hawfields as MY place. Not in some clumsy ownership sense, but rather as home.

Okay, but so what? Isn't this supposed to be a *Sabbatical* report? Yes. And that attachment I formed made it hard to actually commit to the Sabbatical provision of my Terms of Call. After six years of service, I was to have a Sabbatical. Into my seventh year, several congregation members asked me about it. Dismissively, I didn't discourage the notion that we (the church) couldn't afford it. I made noise about putting together a proposal, applying for grants, even



## WEEK THREE:

### June 14th-20th

Visit with *St. Mark's Church*,  
Burlington, NC (online)  
*Johnson Chapel AME Church*,  
Mebane, NC, (in-person)  
Leaving for Chattanooga,  
TN, and our family vacation  
Visit with *New Hope*  
*Presbyterian Church* (in-person)

## WEEK FOUR:

### June 21st-27th

More family vacation,  
including visit to UT-  
Chattanooga  
Visit with *Front Street UMC*  
(in-person)  
Visit with *First Presbyterian*  
*Church*, Burlington, NC (in-  
person)

## WEEK FIVE:

### June 28th-July 4th

2nd visit with parents,  
Charleston, WV  
Visit with brother, Phillip, in  
State College, PA  
Visit with *Calvary Christian*  
*Church*, Lynnfield, MA  
(online)

## WEEK SIX:

### July 5th-11th

Visit with Clark Raynal,  
collaboration on music for  
the Montreat Youth  
Conference, Newport News,  
VA  
Visit with *Hilton Presbyterian*  
*Church* (online)

## WEEK SEVEN:

### July 12th-18th

Home prepping for the  
*Montreat Youth Conference*

forming a steering committee. But as much as I might point the finger at various factors for a delay, the truth is I simply wasn't ready.

The pandemic changed that. A confluence of factors collaborated for God to finally get my attention. The pandemic forced us into acting on some important truths, most importantly, the need to stop and reflect on what we've been doing. The exhausting process of "reinventing how to do church" woke up a realization that I needed to *stop putting off stopping* to reflect as well. And if the promises I made to Hawfields meant anything, *I* needed to follow through. I hadn't yet codified it into language I was willing to use for myself, but my colleague Rev. Laura Becker put it best when reflecting on her Sabbatical:

*"It was important for them to know that the church world would spin on without me...and it was important for ME to know that also."*

Yes, I needed the rest. I was burning out, by all conceivable measures. And if you've ever gone without sleep and tried to function, you know exactly how much can get missed, misjudged, and mistaken in that state. Yes, the church needed to let me go and renew their sense of my role. Yes, I needed to rediscover those pieces of me I had allowed to go to sleep. Yes, I needed to make my church visits and learn what I was able from so many. But the most important part of this process for me, I think, was accepting that I am utterly, completely, replaceable. Lord knows, Hawfields was established in 1755. In all that time, what makes my contribution to the congregation's future any more significant or consequential than others? In point of fact, my contribution was only possible with the courage and foresight of others. The only indispensable part of our history is that God has been *actively* present.

Oh, I talk a good game about "trying to work myself out of a job" and "if I get abducted, hit by a bus, etc., the church needs to be able to move on", but in my heart of hearts, I saw myself as uniquely positioned. Let's be clear: there is some truth to that. Think of what the Bible would be like if the disciples just gave up. What would have happened to the Church if Paul decided Gentiles were on their own? What would become of us if Rev. Henry Patillo had decided to say "No" to being the organizing pastor of Hawfields? What if the slave balcony had not been built or the gender divider taken out? What if the search committee had given up after several disappointments? What I can say for certain is that God's hand is visible through all of it, through this time of rest, and through whatever is coming next. That includes calling whomever is supposed to be in leadership of this remarkable congregation. The simple reality of my being at Hawfields is that *GOD* called me there. And God can, at anytime, call me away. I think my 11 years, if I'm honest, was making me lose my sense of *humility* about my call. I need to stop taking my folks for granted. I need to stop taking myself for granted.

I also learned some important things about our sister churches. If we try to "compete" with the mega churches (or, really, *any* churches) we will *lose*. We are not geared for that, we are not called for that. In a world that demands better online access, better amenities, better production values than we provide, we are ill-equipped. This is not to say we are dead as a congregation. I saw plenty of congregations like us, our size and smaller and larger, thriving. The differences were instructive.

## WEEK EIGHT:

July 19th-25th

Leaving for the *Youth*  
Conference, Montreat, NC

## WEEKS 9 & 10:

July 26th-August 7th

Leading Music & Worship,  
Sunday-Friday, for the *Youth*  
Conference

## WEEK ELEVEN:

August 8th-14th

Prepping for the Sherman/  
Cook Wedding in Gary, IN  
Visit with *Crosslink Community*  
*Church*, Mebane, NC (online)

## WEEK TWELVE:

August 15th-21st

Visit with *Zion Church*,  
Greenbelt, MD (in-person &  
online)  
Leave for Wedding

## WEEK THIRTEEN:

August 22nd-28th

Visit with several  
congregation members of  
various area churches, Gary  
IN (in-person)  
Turning mind toward re-  
entry

AUGUST 29TH:

Last Day

There were three major things I observed in my anecdotal church study. First, self-awareness matters a great deal. Second, the mega churches were surprisingly homogenous (not always in good ways). And lastly, that people's reasons for attending worship and being part of a church were not what I expected

## corporate self-awareness

So, of course, a Presbyterian would say that theology matters. In their ways, *everybody* says that. But I guess the difference I would observe here is self-awareness. My encounters with these churches over the summer showed a frequent disconnect between the theology represented or desired linguistically or rhetorically and the theology that was actually practiced. Churches who wanted to be service or mission-oriented but were very much homebodies; Those who wanted to emphasize openness or hospitality but were very much tightly closed communities; Those who wanted to future-oriented or "forward-looking" but were maddeningly nostalgia-oriented. On that last, I found the churches in question wanting the future to be utterly on their terms rather than dealing with the future that comes to them.

But it was not all inconsistency. There were some congregations for whom their express theology was indeed their practicing theology. Like the congregation in Chattanooga who declared wanting to be open to anyone and looking around at their folks it was evident this was so: wide demographic variety, various ages,

## Observation

Are we really open to God shaping us  
differently?

and, as I came to learn, various theological perspectives. Their theology was clearly driving who they strove to be as a church. I personally felt those churches who clearly were *expecting visitors* were most congruent with their theology of hospitality. There was a church in Burlington, NC, whose early service was a contemporary service hosted in their Fellowship Hall. When I arrived I found no one at the entrance, the foyer, or subsequently in the halls. I had to find the service by following the music I heard to the worship space. Once there, several reached out to me, made room for me, provided me with a bulletin and a portable wafer and juice cup (it happened to be Communion; no, the irony of my welcome to this church against the welcome Jesus provides to the Table is not lost on me). At one of our area mega churches, the only people who actually spoke to me were people already acquainted with me.

It all begged several questions for me of my own ministry and my partnership with Hawfields. If polled, most in my congregation would say anyone is welcome. But the homogeneity of our crowd speaks volumes, especially in the light of the rapidly changing demographics of our entire county. We're not changing with it. The new families and individuals arriving are not finding us. How can that be? Our location alone should be a boon to our participating membership. But our theology bends toward preservation. We want to keep what we have, the way

# Budget

\$6800

Compensation for Sam Jenkins, CRE

\$200

Mileage for Sam

\$5000

Travel, food and lodging to visit sites

\$22,510

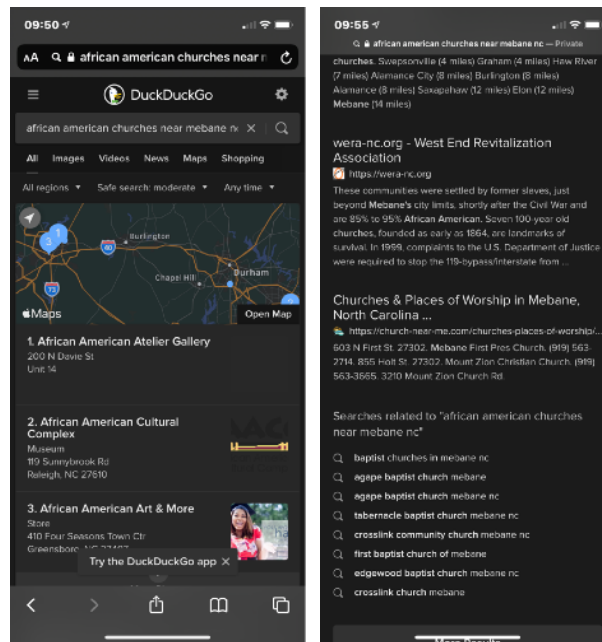
Regular compensation for David Ealy, Pastor

**\$34,510 TOTAL**

we've had it. And we're not alone. Most churches I experienced practiced theology this way. But the inconsistency makes me ask: do we really want to be found? Are we really open to God shaping us *differently*? Why does adjusting or changing feel so much like some metaphysical, spiritual, or even actual *betrayal*? We like to say

Jesus is changing our life. How is that so?

I spent some time trying to find worship services to attend that were predominantly African-American or Latinx, for examples. As the screen shots of one of my Internet searches indicates, this was not easy. The first five entries were not churches at all. It wasn't until the eleventh entry that I finally hit upon entries that were remotely relevant. Is this because the search engine has bias? Maybe. Is this because, in this case, African-American churches don't have as big a web presence as their counterparts? Sure. But what's behind that?



We, as churches, use familial language (our sister church, for example) but we really don't act like a healthy family. We don't share. Whether it's members, money, music or bandwidth, we are very territorial as churches and act circumspect in our inter-ecclesial and interfaith relationships. Some churches tended these relationship better than others, sure. But largely, the clear majority of churches had no vital relationships beyond their own crowd. I observed this summer that there is very little emphasis on the part of almost any church to track and be proactive about the needs of their fellow churches, much less the larger community.

## Homogeneity

The mega churches were all the same. Oh, there were certainly differences in style, and, of course, the people, but I was astounded at how similar each worship experience felt, even the building layouts. Whether in Tennessee, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Virginia, Indiana or North Carolina, rural or urban, the services were structured the same. It is impossible for me to not make comparisons with our own Hawfields Alive! Service and wonder about doing it differently, that is, if we are really committed to doing a service of that kind.

We are far too risk-averse. I blame myself for a lot of where we are now (remember the discussion about burn out). I feel I can say objectively that I am NOT as playful as I was when we started together. We are good for taking *small* risks. But we expend a great deal of energy to fly under the radar and maintain as non-controversial a posture as possible. As I observe the activity (and inactivity) of our sister churches, I am waking up to a reality as a leader I have long suspected: I am not as brave I like to imagine I am (more on that later). We as a congregation are not as brave as our own history would suggest we should be. Like my eleven years,





the more than 260 years we've lived as given us a sense of complacency and a strange permission to take for granted the foothold of our church.

So naturally the mega churches must represent a counter to this. Right? But they weren't. If looking at membership alone, I suppose I'd could argue that they are doing *something* right. But popularity is not the beacon of success it's often presented to be.

One thing the mega churches *all* did is they had a central figure (typically a male; in fact, of the eight mega churches I observed, all of them were led by males; I know there are a few led by females, but none near my sample area). This man was the center of their church governance, worship life, mission activity, and visioning. It's efficient, effective and not Biblical. If the life of Moses or even Jesus himself was any indication, diversifying the leadership is the Biblical model for governing. It's why, I believe the theology of these leaders is so similar across the board, why my experience at each of these places was so remarkably similar from church to church. The things I experienced in these places felt like efforts to preserve these men and their position and to glorify their take on the world.

I will own how judgmental that sounds. And let's face it: I don't know of any preacher that does it entirely differently. After all, God's calling people, not robots, into ministry, and that means bringing our perspectives and limitations to the job, to the tasks. But keeping Christ's supremacy as Head of the Church is an important filter for me and one I employed in every church I visited (whether or not

# Scrutiny

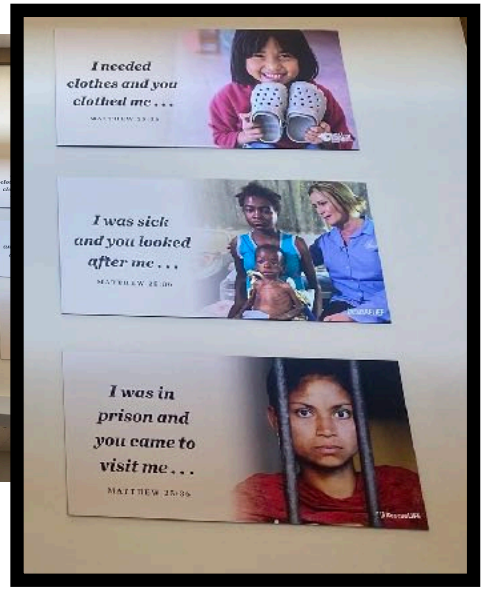
But keeping Christ's supremacy as Head of the Church is an important filter for me and one I employed in every church I visited (whether or not I employed that well).

I employed that well). And while each worship experience was unique in some respects, several of the smaller churches and all of the mega churches gave me the distinct impression that the man in charge of their church was not Jesus.

The other similarity I ran into was the expressed theology of these places, especially when it came to women. Women were to be given a voice, but protected, but prevented from leadership, but in their proper role, but imaged in a pristine and unblemished fashion, whatever that meant to the speaker in question. At a Mebane-area church, the preacher engaged on the story of Ruth. But in talking about her encounter with Boaz, refused to acknowledge the common linguistic scholarship regarding the idea of her being at "the feet" of Boaz. He expressly said, "I just refuse to believe it had anything to do with sex. I think she was simply at his feet, in a sign of her submission. That's all." He rejected the meaning of the idiom because it didn't fit *his* worldview. But who would challenge such an interpretation? For whom would it occur to question it? And in their structure, his word was absolute. And because he was folksy and likable, there was an edge in the mind of his listeners that he was simply "telling it like it is." The reason I know this is because in talking with parishioners, this is what they reported to me.

James Breakwell, Exploding ...  
@XplodingUnicorn

[packing for a trip]  
Wife: Did you forget anything?  
Me: No. I checked twice.  
Wife: \*finds 95 things I missed\*



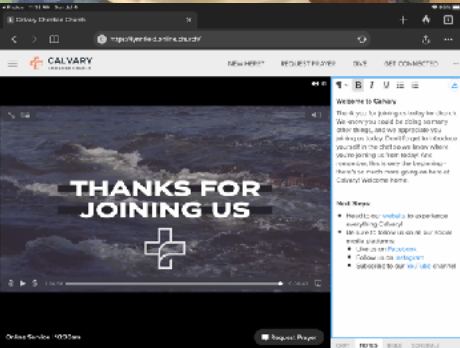
The other similarity in theology I ran into was the “Savior” complex (for lack of a better term). The entrance to a Burlington area church was walled with huge pictures of people in various states of need: hunger, for medicine, for shelter, clothing, etc. The only people pictured in need did NOT look like ANY of the people sitting in the congregation. My feeling conspicuous was exacerbated by the fact that the *only* people in the building I could observe looking anything like me were pictured on that wall. The only people helping did not look like me. With only one visit it is impossible to say whether this presentation was intentional, at least in the sense that they meant for me to get the message that this display of their *theology of help* gave to me. But the idea that none of the people looked geographically or demographically close to the people worshipping in that space told me that *other* people need *our white* help but people near by need to get it together. As it happens, I know this church does some work with drug rehab and other ministries. But none of the impoverished I’ve observed in Burlington, Graham or Mebane were represented on their wall.

But the black mega church I attended did this also. The images were somewhat different but the message was the same: people who need our help don’t live close by. The music was different but accomplished the same mission: getting our hearts and minds ready for the central man to share his sense of divinity.

Again, I acknowledge that the same criticism could be leveled at me. God knows, I’ve spent my career worrying about it. I earnestly believe that God continues to speak to us. It is not always through the voice of a preacher. And one thing these mega churches reinforced for me is that God’s voice will not always come through me even if I am acting out of my office as Pastor. For Jesus to really be in charge of our church, Jesus must be in charge of me also.

## Koinonia

In talking with various church folk about their experiences and their reasons for attending church, as you can imagine, perspectives were as varied as there were people. But a remarkable similarity emerged in our conversations.



To the very wide-open question—Why do you go to church?—people named fellowship as their number one reason. Of the many folks I spoke with, very few talked about their spiritual development (that is, getting closer to Jesus) as their principal reason without prompting. Unprompted, people named plainly connecting with other people as their principal reason for attending *worship*, for Bible Study gathering, for mission work, for church. While in some ways this wasn't very surprising (especially with the Pandemic), it was nevertheless frustrating.

Coming out of seminary, I was very aware that my training as the local spiritual director, theologian and scholar was at odds with the run of the mill congregational expectations. Not that people didn't want me to do those things, but the priorities for most folks were facilitating fellowship, pastoral care and helping interpret God's direction within their relationships. With some notable exception, this was not my explicit training. So this summer I tried to engage people on what they really expected their version of pastor to do. The lists all pointed in the direction of facilitating fellowship.

As I reflect on my own ministry, let me first say, I am profoundly grateful for my theological training. I think learning how to think is as important as committing to think in the first place. I also know that I continue to benefit from the lessons and

Helping steer congregation members to each other is one of the big pieces of why the mega churches and other growing congregations work, as far as I could observe.

# Insight

practices I picked up in seminary and with my CPM and COMs, my mentor Pastors, and patient church members. But this focus for me, professionally, is lacking. Helping steer congregation members to each other is one of the big pieces of why the mega churches and other growing congregations work, as far as I could observe.

## In the End

While the theological and practical aspects of the Sabbatical were instructive and helpful, the rest was the real miracle-worker. It felt good to simply exchange ideas, not for some end, but to connect with people. It felt good to put down the mantle of leadership and take on a role of observation and reflection, to see things about myself I had forgotten.

For example, my time leading music for the Montreat Youth Conference would seem on its face to be more of my pastoral role. But it proved a real departure and therefore and restful experience, especially because I rediscovered songwriting and collaborating with other musicians in that way. It was thrilling and invigorating. Very grateful to God and my church to have had the experience!

*David Eady*