

What is a sabbatical?

A sabbatical is an extended time of sabbath. It involves resting and recharging to bring about rejuvenation. After giving out for a season, it's important to rest (using an example from agricultural farming, it's like leaving land 'fallow') so that leaders can come back replenished so that they are set up to continue to pursue God's calling for them and the church they lead.

Sabbaticals are commonly practised in many church denominations, including the Vineyard. The Vineyard movement nationally encourages their church leaders to take a sabbatical once every 7 years. We planted the church in 2017, which meant that 2024 would be a natural sabbatical, but decided in conversation with our Trustees that we would work towards 2025 when we anticipated things would be in a healthier place to take time off.

Just as a sabbath day involves stopping from normal day-to-day roles and responsibilities, sabbaticals are a time where pastors cease to be involved in leading the church.

Why take a sabbatical?

We (Josh and Katie) hope that our sabbatical will be a time for us to invest in praying, reading, thinking and resting as we reflect on what's happened so far, which will help us get ready for this next chapter.

We will use the space created to rest and invest in relationships; with God, our marriage, and close family. It also gives time for a spiritual 'health check' as we look at self-reflection and how we relate to ourselves.

For the church, there will be the benefit of us returning refreshed, but we have also heard from others that the church can also benefit by people taking leadership opportunities, leading to growth, which impacts the church even after the leaders return.

When are we going?

We plan to take a sabbatical for 3 months:

- Katie from 1st June until 1st September 2025.
- Josh from 11th June until 11th September 2025

When we return, we'll be resuming our roles at the church.

What will we be doing whilst we are away?

We plan to make space to hear from God. We intend to spend some time on our own and together so we can read and think and pray in quiet places. Where possible we will also follow practices designed to help us invest in our relationship with God, each other and our children who have also given out as they have planted Hope Vineyard with us.

Can people contact us whilst we are away?

We will be turning off our phones and not looking at our church emails whilst we are away. The staff and leadership team will keep an eye on our communication channels whilst we are away.

We will try our best not to look at social media to see if revival has broken out! In reality, we think it's going to be extremely hard for us not to spend time with our Hope family, and wider church family, because we love you all so much. We will make a sneaky visit to the youth festival DTI (Dreaming the Impossible), as much for our children as for our own benefit as it's such a rich time of worship and friendship.

However, during the sabbatical, what we would ask is that you don't attempt to directly contact us whilst we are away, so that we can fully engage in resting and recharging.

Who will hold the fort? And who is supporting our leaders?

Thankfully, we don't lead this church on our own, we have a great team of leaders and volunteers around us. We are also very blessed to have fantastic support from our Board of Trustees (David, Donna and Katie), our Area Leaders, Guy and Esther, and our mentors, Chris and Fliss (founding pastors from St Alban's Vineyard - Now called Verso Vineyard). Additionally locally, we have support through the love Oxford network, and our local Vineyard links to Andrew and Mandy who lead Oxford Vineyard Church, who are all on hand to help in our absence.

Jules Stephenson (Children's and Family Lead & Hope Projects Lead), and Martin (who had been involved in Welcome support), will be the main point of contacts for the leaders at Hope, with Jacinta (who is our Virtual Admin Assistant), and Andy (our virtual Finance Support) and are amazing, and gifted people.

We will stand by any decisions made by them upon our return, and we can say this with complete ease because we know them well, we see their character and their love for this church and we trust their judgements.

In terms of leaders at Hope, there is a whole team, which includes Sunday Coordinators for each Sunday, and Life Group Leaders. During this time will have some of the regular teaching team doing the talks on Sundays and some visiting speakers. Jules and Martin will work closely with these leaders and will seek their advice. We don't envisage that Jules and Martin will act on any important decisions without first seeking and weighing up the advice that our leadership support network gives, just as we do now.

What about Sundays and Life Groups?

Each Sunday Gathering has a Sunday Coordinator, who will be coordinating the various roles on Sundays, and increasingly they are leading on Sundays, and will be more front and centre in these roles during May, before Josh and Katie go on sabbatical. Worship / preaching / Hope Kids rotas and more are all done in advance. And if something can't happen as per usual, that's absolutely fine.

With Life Groups, Ryan and Randi will continue to lead, and Johnny and Izzy will be hosting while Rebecca is stepping in to support the leading of the Life Group currently led/hosted by Josh and Katie.

At gatherings, when newcomers arrive, Josh and Katie won't be there to follow up, but this is something that in reality we already share with many of you. However, as we are able, let's meet up with newcomers and talk with others and the leaders, to check we are casting the net wide with following up with the various people who come. Take people's numbers etc wherever it's appropriate. We're a family. Let's grow in our culture of invitation. Introduce people to each other, encouraging people into every aspect of community (Life Groups, serving, giving, and gathering to worship on Sundays) on their journey to explore Hope.

What should you do if there is an emergency?

In an emergency or a matter of significant importance, in the first instance with pastoral matters, go to your Life Group, Sunday Coordinator, or the relevant leader. The leaders can then go to Jules and Martin if it's something that can't be resolved by them. Jules remains Safeguarding Lead during this time, and will have relevant support from Hannah Brown (who is stepping in as Deputy Safeguarding Lead in Katie's absence), our trustees, VCUKI (Vineyard Churches UK and Ireland) and the specialist Safeguarding Advice Service to which we are enrolled (called 'thirtyone:eight').

As the church is governed by a group of trustees made up of dedicated people who look after legal and financial matters, Jules and Martin will be meeting with them for support while we are away, and our Regional Leaders will be available to support them too.

What can you do whilst we are away?

If you regard yourself as belonging to this church family, then we trust that you will pray for Jules and Martin and the leadership team and support them as your leaders – that's what the Bible invites us to do as we honour our leaders.

After that, be present. Get involved. Do amazing things that will usher the Kingdom of God into your heart and into our communities. Our hope and expectation are that whilst we are away, this church family, under their leadership, will flourish, will grow, will extend its impact over our area, and will draw people into a new and deeper relationship with Jesus.

Our hope and expectation are that you will be empowered and equipped to make apprentices of Jesus in your everyday lives, as you share the good news about Jesus through your words and actions. Our prayer is that the community we live within will be transformed to become increasingly full of people who are full of life. As we shared on Vision Sunday (27/04/2025), our focus in this season is 'everyone gets to play' (do find it on the website to catch up if you missed it www.hopeoxford.org/livestreams).

Far from the church pressing the pause button, our hope and expectation are that whilst we are away, God will continue to move, such that when we come back, we are expectant of the stories we will hear and the goodness of God.

How can you pray for us?

Pray that we become still enough to hear everything that Jesus wants to say to us because we want to grow as leaders and prepare for all that God has in store for us in the years ahead.