



**Such an experience may not be for everyone.
But I will always be grateful.**

A Sabbatical at Harvard University

By James W. Price

I applaud CHRISTIAN STANDARD for the encouragement to churches to send their ministers on sabbaticals. Seeing their pastor as a precious, long-term investment will help a church become strong, healthy, effective, and happy.

After serving 20 years with the Diamond Canyon Christian Church in Diamond Bar, California, I had conversations with the elders who wanted to give me the sabbatical experience. Several options were mentioned, and the one that most inspired me was to go to Harvard for a year of study.

Why Harvard?

I have always valued challenging academic environments. I attended Pacific Christian College (Fullerton, California) and Fuller Theological Seminary (Pasadena, California). I also took a year of study at Lewis and Clark Law School (Portland, Oregon) and studied with Peter Drucker at Claremont (California) Graduate University. I have a passion for highly-charged learning experiences, professors on fire for their field of study, and students open to the call of life.

Harvard, located in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is not known as a bastion of evangelicalism. However, almost all of my study had been from an evangelical perspective, and I felt a year at Harvard could serve me well. My education had all come from West Coast schools, and I had lived virtually all my life in Western states. The East Coast beckoned as I remembered the dictum, "The wider



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The Memorial Church at Harvard University hosted a weeklong evangelistic campaign with Tony Campolo during James W. Price's sabbatical at the university.

the exposure, the greater the vision."

I applied to Harvard Divinity School and was admitted for the 2001-02 academic year. I took a maximum load each semester for a total of 10 courses. I took half of my course work at the Divinity School and half at the Kennedy School of Government.

Each of my professors was a renowned authority in his field. I felt privileged to walk in their shadows and to come to know some as friends.

There are so many guest speakers and seminars at Harvard that even if

I hadn't attended a single class, I still could have gotten an education. I had the privilege of hearing United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Ruby Bridges (who, as a little girl in 1960, helped integrate public schools in New Orleans), Baptist minister and Harvard Professor Peter Gomes, Baptist minister Tony Campolo (founder of the Evangelical Association for the Promotion of Education), Baptist minis-

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ter and Harvard Professor Harvey Cox, Harvard professor and author Cornell West, paleontologist and evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould, Sojourners and Call to Renewal founder Jim Wallis, well-known attorney and Harvard Law Professor Alan Dershowitz, Harvard public policy professor and Kennedy School of Government Dean Joseph Nye, public policy lecturer and author Samantha Powers, and several others. Eighteen heads of state spoke at Harvard the year I was there.

But Was It a Spiritual Experience?

Many of the world-class liberal seminaries are less liberal than they once were, and Harvard is no exception. While Harvard Divinity School is liberal and pluralistic, I still found several professors who loved the Lord and were open in their faith; many were deeply committed Christians who were active in the church. Probably one-quarter to one-third of the students were committed Christians. Of the rest, some were committed to non-Christian religions and some were simply academically motivated. Many were preparing for service and leadership in areas of community or world concern, and most were interested and open to finding eternal answers to life. I found opportunities to graciously share about Christ, the church, and Christian living in both the Kennedy School and the Divinity School.

About 50 evangelical students formed a group and became a recognized campus organization. We led worship, held Bible studies, and helped sponsor a weeklong evangelistic campaign with Campolo at Harvard's Memorial Church (the huge campus church). Hundreds of students responded in that one week.

Harvard Divinity School's Friday morning worship graciously gave me the opportunity to speak. I preached a thoroughly biblical message on miracles and was warmly received.

Back in California

I flew to California about every six weeks during the nine months and preached five times at Diamond Canyon.

One family and three graduate students from the church spent time with me in Cambridge. I was broadened in my understanding of what God is doing in the world and was enriched in perspective.

I came back more excited for ministry, more intellectually committed, and more focused on leadership and making an impact for Christ than when I left. I strengthened my per-

The congregation was proud their minister was learning at Harvard, and they raised the bar on their own commitment in the process.

sonal organization and discipline skills and even cut my television viewing to two hours a week!

While my absence was a challenge to the Diamond Canyon Christian Church, it also was a surprising blessing. We planned for it carefully. Both the elders and staff raised their profile and responsibilities. Ministry continued unabated. I wrote a weekly article with humor about various experiences to help keep the church family connected. We had



The author and his wife, Deidra, at Harvard.

powerful guest speakers for series of messages. I had the congregation present a Harvard T-shirt to each speaker, reminding everyone that the church members were in my thoughts. The congregation missed me, but they were proud their minister was learning at Harvard, and they raised the bar on their own commitment in the process.

Many ministers would be bored stiff with this kind of academic sabbatical. And certainly not all would choose Harvard. But for those so inclined, a semester or two of concentrated study would pay great dividends. There is a significant cost to such a sabbatical. In my case, the church continued my full salary, but I paid for tuition, books, room and board in Cambridge, and travel expenses for me and my family. But the experience has opened up significant opportunities for me in ministry, has blessed the Diamond Canyon church, and given me something for which I cannot thank God, the elders, and this church family enough.

James W. Price continues as senior pastor with the Diamond Canyon Christian Church in Diamond Bar, California.