Laura Stephens-Reed:

Well, happy New Year, Iona. How are you today?

Iona:

I am doing just fine, thank you. How are you?

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Good. I am doing well.

Iona:

Good.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

And glad to be talking with you today.

Iona:

Indeed.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Were you able to get some downtime after Christmas?

Iona:

Sort of.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Just jump right back into it?

Iona:

Yes, pretty much. Pretty much. It seems like Lent is about here and all the things that go with that is swirling, but I'm doing okay.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Well good, good.

Iona:

Yeah.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Well, what would you like to focus our coaching conversation on today?

Iona:

So I have been up in the middle of the night pondering sabbatical take two, and I wanted to talk through that a little bit today.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Okay. What specifically about sabbatical take two?

Iona:

So I have been realizing that I have such decision fatigue around how to schedule sabbatical this year after having canceled it last year. And I don't even know where to begin figuring out all of the pieces to the puzzle and hoping to avoid yet another canceled sabbatical situation because I don't think my emotional wellbeing can take that one more time. And I realize I'm also so past needing sabbatical that it seems impossible to figure out how to even take it.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Okay. So what can we dig down on today that will help you get some traction with decision fatigue and move you towards some planning?

Iona:

Yeah, I was pondering that and I was thinking about the four things... Well, maybe five things if I consider timing, the other one, that I'm sort of juggling in my head. One is church life and sort of the church rhythms, thinking about the important things coming up in the life of the church, the pandemic being uncertain, not having any idea when we might regather as a congregation, thinking about my kids and their schooling. They have been 100% remote, there is still talk that they might return, but I have no idea when or how or what that might look like. And then there's my spouse and his work and trying to figure out that piece to the puzzle. Then there is the ability to travel. We want to do something fun, and taking sabbatical in the midst of a pandemic when my kids are learning from home just sounds like no fun.

And then the piece of the puzzle of, do I take it all together, do I split it up? How do I do that? I mean, I had this three-month chunk of summer with an amazing trip plan for last year. I just don't know how to juggle all of those pieces and make a plan that won't get canceled. Yeah, that's what I've got.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Well, before we kind of jump into some of these details, what is it that you are needing from your sabbatical, whatever it looks like and whenever it is?

Iona:

Oh, I need rest. I am weary and I need to completely deep unplug, I guess is the word, the constantness that is pastoring life where my phone rings all the time, the emails are constant, the text messages come, the Facebook messages come. And so just to completely disconnect entirely, I mean to forward my Google Voice phone to somebody else for some chunk of time, all of that resting is what I'm just desperate for.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

How will that rest and that ability to unplug affect how you show up for your church upon your return from sabbatical?

Iona:

I for sure think I'm going to show up in a better place once I am rested. I feel like I am not giving them my best self and best work right now. I mean, I'm giving them enough, but I'm not giving it my best because I'm so tired. And so I imagine being well rested and just the work we can do together from that place is such a more positive thing.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Yeah. So you've named the why for your sabbatical and there are these different pieces of timing that you're trying to figure out. So what specifically do you hope to take away from our conversation to help you manage the timing pieces so that you get the rest and the unplugging?

Iona:

You're not going to just tell me what to do?

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Well, let me open my book to page 30. Oh, that page has been torn out. Sorry.

Iona:

Shucks. I think I want to have some tentative plan that I can begin to explore, and you're always good about helping me bring to the surface what is most important instead of to pull that piece so that I can make some of these decisions that have to get made so that I can plan.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

So am I hearing that you want to come away with a plan to help you plan?

Iona:

Yes. Is that-

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Okay. Sure.

Iona:

Yeah. I mean, I think because there's a piece of it that that's my planning and my family's planning, and then there's the piece that involves the church and figuring out the details there. But in order to get to that piece, I need to have sort of a proposal and an idea in mind, and so to make some headway on that would be helpful.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Okay. So in order to put together that proposal, what are the kinds of information, what are the decisions you need to have made?

Iona:

I think one of the biggest pieces I really need to think about is all of it at once or splitting it up. And I keep going back and forth between the incredible gift that is three months uninterrupted and the rest and the unplugging that can happen in that, and the reality that is the unknown school situation, the

abilities or lack thereof, to travel. And I wonder about splitting it from the perspective of getting to some of it sooner and saving some of it when potentially in the fall we can actually do something.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Okay. So as you think about the why for your sabbatical, the resting and the unplugging, what does that speak into this decision of altogether or split it up?

Iona:

The need for rest, I don't know how much longer that can wait. And I've got vacation next week and the week after, and so that might provide enough to sort of limp along a little longer, but I don't know that it's going to provide enough to get me through to the fall for instance, and taking all of it at once.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Okay. So what would your options be in terms of when you could take it all together or how you might split it up? What are the different possibilities there?

Iona:

Yeah. So I've been pondering a six week and six week, so straight down the middle with a spring and fall component, which is sort of option one. The travel piece being so uncertain for the spring because we've even talked about, which is just completely ridiculous, pulling the kids... Not pulling them because they're not in-person school, taking school with us and driving cross country to go see my family in New York after Easter or something like that. So that's sort of a possibility, but then if they go back to school, do I really want to keep them from school when they haven't been in-person school in about a year, or it will have been a year by March. And this is where I just get bogged down in all the decisions and I just can see myself on the path of, "It's too hard to make a decision so I'm not going to do anything."

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Okay. So instead of making a decision, what are the other options? Let's zoom back out.

Iona:

Keeping going at the exhausted pace that I am, which is not really a good option at all.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

And then taking your time off when?

Iona:

When everything is back to normal and then planning it, so months after that, which is exhausting to just even think about.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

So waiting even to plan it until precautions are removed, etc.?

Iona:

Right.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Okay.

Iona:

Which I don't think I can do.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

So it sounds almost like these are two opposite ends of the spectrum. One is to break it up and take half of it as soon as Lent and Easter are over and then the other part later and then on the other end is waiting until you have some clarity about when you can travel and what you can do, etc. So what's in the middle? What are the middle options?

Iona:

That's a good question. I wonder about what it would look and feel like to plan for things, for nothing to have changed in our world and to develop a plan. And then if circumstances change, I can adapt to what we are doing versus the timing.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Okay. Say more about what you mean by adapting to what we're doing versus the timing.

Iona:

The waiting for things to change in our pandemic world feels so uncertain and I don't have a clue when that might be, that I wonder what it would do to just plan as though the pandemic is never going to go away, which is not true, but to plan as though it's not, and to develop a plan that would work, pandemic or no pandemic, so that potentially I would not be disappointed.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Okay. What effect would planning as if the pandemic was going to go on forever have on your decision fatigue?

Iona:

I think that it would allow for something, and not like we've planned a month-long European vacation in March, just to be disappointed, but instead to plan something that we can totally do. So if it is that driving to New York, when can we go? Whether the kids are in school or not, what can we do regardless so that I have something to look forward to. And then almost if things start to open up, then we can almost do more rather than less. And somehow more feels better than disappointment less again.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

So what are your options if the pandemic is never ending? What are the options that are not dependent on it going away?

Iona:

Well, I think if I take out the, "Do the kids go back to school or not?" Question and wait until school is out, no matter what capacity that is, which looks at mid-June, that allows for one decision to not have to

happen, which is if they go back and we have a big trip planned, then what? And so then if I think about some sort of right after they're out in June, a month or two, and then I almost feel like if I hold a month until the fall, hopefully then we could do something. And if not, the kids hopefully will be back in=person school and then at least I could have the house to myself.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

I hear that.

Iona:

And at this point, even an empty house sounds like heaven on earth. That would allow for a little bit of everything without having to get all consumed in things that I can't control.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Okay. Yeah. How do you feel about waiting until mid-June for that six to eight weeks? Because you said, "I need it sooner rather than later."

Iona:

Right. I do have a month of vacation, which if I actually used it all, and I have even more based on some rollover from last year. So with these two weeks coming up, and if I were to plan two or even three after Easter, I think I might, because they're sort of spaced out well, I might be able to get to June.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Okay. With the added benefit, it sounds like, of taking all your vacation.

Iona:

Yes.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

So how are you feeling about this possibility of taking out what you can't control, kids' school, travel conditions, to look at mid-June, taking a big chunk and saving a chunk for the fall and using your vacation to help pull you forward until that extended time away?

Iona:

This feels entirely doable and hopeful.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Oh, good.

Iona:

Yes. And thinking about some significant chunks of vacation between now and then also feels manageable. And I love that I got to a place of planning even if the pandemic is not changed, if nothing has changed. And I think the piece I'm going to have to let go is if in mid-June the church is ready to regather, they can do that without me.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

How could you prepare them and yourself starting now in case that's the scenario?

Iona:

It almost feels like if I tell them now that this is my plan, what unfolds is beyond me, and so therefore it's not like I planned to be gone while we're regathering, it's I had planned to be gone and this unfolded. And part of my not going last year was anticipating getting back together and it didn't happen, so I can't do that again.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

So you said you wanted to take away a plan to help you plan to be able to put together a proposal. What else do you need to have that?

Iona:

I don't even know. I think this is enough of that, that I can go to my leadership and have a proposal of mid-June to mid-August, part one. October, November, somewhere in there, part two. And start working with them to plan toward that as a congregation and then just working on my family end to figure out details of what we could do together.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Yeah. So you've got kind of basic information to take to your leadership, some thoughts, questions to take to your family. What do you need internally to get the ball rolling on all of this?

Iona:

Yeah, I think just this next vacation, sort of sitting with this picture of what's coming to let go of some of the stress of what has been and start looking toward the future of what is, and get to a place of hopeful planning instead of just stagnant treading water.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

How will you know if you've gotten to that place?

Iona:

That's a good question. I think thinking about where I am in terms of planning and asking some of my leaders to help me on that journey, so that it's not mine alone to carry.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

So then, is that initial conversation or conversations a pre-vacation thing or a post-vacation thing?

Iona:

Yeah, I have a meeting on Thursday with my... No, Wednesday, with my two key leaders. And so one of the things I had wanted to talk with them about is tentative sabbatical planning. And so that is the big piece to that puzzle, and then send in a few more emails to get some meetings in place for when I return. I think we'll get all of that moving.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Great.

Iona:

Yes, thank you.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Sure. So what do you want to kind of lock in terms of actions you're going to take to move you toward being able to take sabbatical whatever is going on in the world?

Iona:

I'm going to talk with my leaders, and talk with my spouse, and put some things on the calendar, some dates if you will, so that I am starting to block it off and start to think about how to communicate with the congregation about what's coming as well, because they know that I had planned on it and had postponed. So communicating to them that it's coming, I think feels really positive looking forward.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Yeah. As you say that, I wonder if that's a hopeful thing not just for you but for them.

Iona:

Oh, yeah.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Things are okay enough, no matter what else is going on, that Iona feels like she can take her sabbatical and we're in good shape here.

Iona:

Yeah. And I think it's a big boost to the leaders that things are in good enough place that I can go and that I trust them.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Because you've all been putting in the work to this point.

Iona:

Yeah.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

So you said you have a meeting with your leaders on Wednesday. Do you want to put a timeline on any of these other actions?

Iona:

Yes. So I'm going to email the other leader that I need to for my pastoral relations committee before I go on vacation. And I have a congregational meeting set for the end of February, and so I want to put

something together for that. And that'll be post vacation, but that will be part of the plan. Oh, I feel excited.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Good. Is there anything else you need to feel ready to take these steps?

Iona:

June?

Laura Stephens-Reed:

You just need June to come? I hear you.

Iona:

No, I think it feels like a really good plan and it feels hopeful and it feels positive and it feels like I've made it over the decision fatigue hurdle.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Yay.

Iona:

Yes. Thank you, Laura.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Sure. You've got your actions, you've got a timeline. What in a larger sense are you taking away from our conversation?

Iona:

Hope, and enthusiasm, and excitement, which is fabulous.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Well, it has made my day that you feel hopeful and excited and enthusiastic, so I look forward to celebrating your time away with you.

Iona:

Thank you, Laura. And I look forward to the next time we chat. And by then I will have even more plans.

Laura Stephens-Reed:

Sounds good. Thank you so much.

Iona:

Thanks, Laura.