



A SURE FOUNDATION

resources for the relationship
between pastors and congregations

SABBATICAL LEAVE

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theological grounding and relational value

Sabbath is a gift from God, because rest is as important as work for the health of all of creation. The seventh day was consecrated as a day of rest, and God ordered all of creation to cease from work on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11). God commanded the people to let the land lie fallow every seven years and replenish itself (Leviticus 25:1-5). Jesus frequently left his followers and his disciples to pray by himself, spending time reflecting on his call, listening to God's voice, and receiving strength and direction for his ongoing ministry.

Rooted in these Biblical commands for Sabbath, a sabbatical is a significant time of rest, renewal and refreshment for pastors.¹ For pastors, the sabbatical is time to nourish their relationship with God, recommit to their call, and provide renewed vision and focus for ministry. A sabbatical is not a vacation, but it does provide time away from the daily work of ministry. Sabbatical leave may include study or a project, but its first goal is reconnecting with one's sense of vocation through rest, reflection, and prayer.

Pastor Roy M. Oswald, formerly of the Alban Institute, has written and lectured extensively on many aspects of congregational life and pastoral ministry. He provides several reasons as to why a congregation should want its pastor to have a sabbatical leave²:

¹ Although this resource is geared toward sabbatical leave for pastors, congregations are encouraged to offer sabbatical leave to all program staff.

² Oswald, Roy. "Why You Should Give Your Pastor a Sabbatical." (VHS/DVD with leader's guide) Alban Institute, 2001.

A sabbatical...

Encourages longer pastorates. Congregations have difficulty realizing long-term goals without having long-term pastorates. Providing a sabbatical leave is one proven strategy for encouraging longer service to congregations and other ministry settings.

Refocuses ministry. A pastor needs an astounding array of skills to be effective in the congregation, especially as local church ministry changes rapidly. A sabbatical offers an opportunity for ministers to learn from others, to sharpen their skills, and to return to the congregation with new ideas and a new vitality for leadership.

Contributes to a pastor's spiritual growth. Being intentional about personal spiritual growth is difficult when a minister is constantly involved in the spiritual lives of others. If a pastor is to provide dynamic leadership, ongoing spiritual nurture, and rich preaching and worship leadership, they will need extended time for spiritual development.

Prevents burnout. People in “helping professions” can burn out, in part because of that constant, intimate involvement with the emotional burdens of others. Burned-out pastors, over time, will demonstrate its key characteristics: exhaustion, cynicism, disillusionment, depression, and self-depreciation. A regular schedule of sabbaticals can help to prevent burnout to the good of both the minister and the congregation.

Establish new patterns for work and self-care. Pastors are constantly encouraged to overextend in a vocation that is never “done,” yet when pastors overextend, they undermine one of their most important gifts in ministry: vitality. A sabbatical provides time for clergy to take a break from the pressure to overextend and to establish new work habits and self-care routines.

Promotes congregational self-sufficiency. Congregations that become overly dependent on their pastors lose the opportunity to exercise their own gifts and leadership. Effective congregations practice a good balance between the pastor and the congregation in leadership. Granting a sabbatical leave is a great opportunity for stretch and experiment with their God-given gifts in the church's life. When a minister or program staff person returns from sabbatical leave, the congregation will also have a much better understanding of how the whole church can participate in meeting the needs of the congregation.



policies and best practices

Sabbaticals take a variety of forms. Many include educational development, such as a language study, intercultural immersion, or advanced coursework on a particular topic. Travel is often a valuable part of the sabbatical experience; ministers may take a pilgrimage to Iona, walk the Camino de Santiago, visit the great museums of Europe, or do a language immersion in Costa Rica or China. Still others revolve around themes that the pastor and church have discerned together to do separately, such as exploring common prayer practices, deepening a connection to the earth, or engaging creative practices of art, music, dance, and literature.

Practically, sabbaticals work best when pastors plan to begin the sabbatical with a period of decompression and end the sabbatical with a week or two preparing for reentry into ministry's daily routine. The period of decompression might simply include a week or two of time with no agendas or alarm clocks, while the latter might include focused review of the sabbatical in preparation for sharing those reflections with the congregation.

A sabbatical is also an opportunity for the congregation, which benefits from a season of rest and reflection and reconnection with God's call for the church's ministry. During the pastor's sabbatical leave, the congregation naturally becomes more aware of its patterns of care for one another, its program cycles, and its worship life. A sabbatical is not an opportunity to change those things unilaterally in the pastor's absence, or to make decisions that the pastor and congregation have been unwilling or unable to do together. Significant decisions or changes should not be made during the sabbatical season unless agreed in advance.

A sabbatical leave is ideally negotiated at the time of call; the UCC Sample Call Agreement provides clear language for sabbatical leave.³ It calls for a three-month sabbatical after every five years of full-time ministry in the congregation (or two months sabbatical leave after seven years of part-time ministry in the church). During the sabbatical, the church pays the pastor full salary and all benefits. Church leadership should communicate the value and importance of a sabbatical to the congregation throughout the sabbatical planning period and during the sabbatical itself.

At least one year prior to the sabbatical year, the pastor should share a general sense of their plans for the sabbatical with the governing body for its input and affirmation. Once these plans are finalized, they should be communicated to the whole church. The pastor and the governing body plan for pastoral care coverage, worship leadership, and other responsibilities during the

³ The Sample Call Agreement can be found here: http://www.ucc.org/ministers_regional-ministers

sabbatical period. Some churches call a sabbatical pastor; some churches rely on lay leadership to provide worship leadership and pastoral care; some churches use supply preachers; many churches do some combination of all of these.

Occasionally, during the sabbatical period, the pastor may choose to “return” briefly for a significant event: *e.g.* at a wedding that was set well in advance of the sabbatical or a significant anniversary celebration or annual meeting. This brief return should be understood as part of the sabbatical plan so that there is no confusion or concern. Likewise, it should be clarified in advance whether the minister will attend or officiate at any funerals during the sabbatical.

During the year when the sabbatical is taken, the pastor still receives their full allotment of vacation. The pastor and governing body may negotiate whether any of that vacation time can be added to the sabbatical time in order to extend its length. Pastors are encouraged take their full allotment of continuing education within the same year as the sabbatical, either as part of the sabbatical itself or to develop their ministry skills at another time during the year. If it is appropriate, the governing body might approve the use of the pastor’s continuing education budget toward sabbatical costs.

When the sabbatical ends, the pastor and the congregation share their learnings from the sabbatical. Through conversations, written reports, meals, and congregational meetings, the congregation and the pastor reconnect and hear the ways God has been at work in one another’s lives. Many congregations offer a grateful farewell to their supply/sabbatical pastor (if they had one) and a celebratory “welcome back” to their pastor through a special event such as worship or a shared meal. Unless by prior agreement, the minister is expected to continue as pastor and teacher for at least one year following their return from sabbatical.

THE CONGREGATION DURING THE SABBATICAL

Many times a congregation asks, “Who takes care of things while our pastor is on sabbatical?” The answer depends greatly on the context of the ministry setting, the sabbatical plan itself, and the needs of the congregation. Some congregations view the sabbatical time as a time of rest and renewal for the community as a whole, downscaling their programmatic responsibilities. Some congregations actively participate in the sabbatical by focusing on the same themes that the minister is exploring while on sabbatical.

In many congregations of all sizes, a sabbatical or supply pastor may be hired. The sabbatical or supply pastor may do all or most of the duties of the pastor, or may only fulfill certain aspects of the pastoral role. This person may work full or part-time. They may be retired, in between calls, or part of a clergy exchange with an international ecumenical partner. At a minimum, most sabbatical pastors preach and provide some pastoral care to address immediate needs.

Congregations of all sizes also choose to have lay leaders shoulder responsibility for certain tasks or roles during the sabbatical leave – whether a sabbatical/supply pastor is hired or not. These tasks may include visitation, worship leadership, and attending to other congregational needs.

In congregations with multiple clergy on staff, the congregation may choose to ask remaining clergy to pick up some or most of the responsibilities of the pastor on sabbatical rather than hiring a sabbatical/supply pastor. This can be a wonderful opportunity for the other clergy on staff to grow in new ways, although the additional responsibilities must be accompanied by the governing body's intentional consideration of which tasks those clergy may set down temporarily from their current job descriptions. Such changes in expectations need to be communicated clearly to the congregation before, during and after the sabbatical period. It's also recommended that additional compensation and vacation time be offered to those clergy who add responsibilities to their existing roles.

Congregations with multiple clergy should also set aside time for the staff and key lay leaders to meet together after the pastor's return to debrief staff concerns and renegotiate staff responsibilities. This process will need time and focused attention; if the purpose of a sabbatical is to renew, refresh, and refocus, then the patterns of teamwork will naturally shift following a sabbatical. In addition, in congregations with multiple clergy on staff, sabbaticals should be staggered to minimize disruption to the congregation, including a significant period of reintegration between different staff sabbaticals.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

Sabbaticals can be times of great joy and refreshment for the pastor and for the congregation, but they can also be challenging. Many pastors report that the hardest thing about sabbatical is letting go of their responsibilities and feeling guilt about what they “should” be doing. Likewise, many congregations miss their pastor during this time and may struggle to adapt to the temporary leadership change.

Mark Miller-McLemore writes, “Something hard to pin down occurs when the community's faith leader steps away. The symbolic power of the priestly role is a real part of any pastor's experience, even in less priestly traditions. Something real and powerful and meaningful attaches itself to the pastoral relationship, something partly personal and partly symbolic, something mysterious and holy. During a sabbatical, ‘it’ is missing, and it is missed. Further, congregational anxiety is less contained without the pastor at the center to model faithfulness in the face of fear.

The burden of added anxiety can mean sleepless nights for staff and lay leaders and can co-opt their agendas.”⁴

Additionally, whenever a minister takes a sabbatical, there are people left behind: the congregation, the minister’s family, or an associate pastor. These folk carry a heavier burden in the absence of the minister. Mark Miller-McLemore notes, “Envy, weariness and resentment are not noble responses, but they are predictable. The congregation should anticipate them and seek ways to respond with understanding.”⁵

Knowing these potential pitfalls can help congregational leaders prepare for them as a faith community before, during and after the sabbatical period. Clear understandings of the purpose of the sabbatical, rituals of separation and re-engagement, and open and honest communication can help minimize the potential negative outcomes of sabbatical. Following a sabbatical, the church and the minister can work together to discover new patterns of living and working together that are healthy and life-giving for the minister and the congregation. The Pastoral Relations Committee can assist in preparing for these possibilities and develop a plan for responding to them faithfully.

Congregations are urged to make full use of their Association or Conference staff in the preparation for sabbatical and once the minister returns. Conference and Association staff can assist in finding pastoral leadership during the sabbatical period, facilitate rituals of separation and re-entry, create space for everyone to give voice to their experiences, and help create healthy plans for the future. They can also help to mediate conflict or refer to consultants who can provide this sort of assistance.

SABBATICAL STORIES

One congregation developed a clear renewal plan with their pastor focused on honoring the body, building community, and engaging the creative spirit. They hired a guest pastor (a recent seminary graduate) to plan and lead worship, provide pastoral care, supervise staff, and attend to other duties, invited guest preachers to speak and lead workshops on these themes, and took seriously their call to be in a season of renewal.

Another congregation blessed their pastor as he went to Westphalia, Germany, to immerse himself in the life of a church there involved in congregational renewal. Their Conference’s partnership with the church in Germany helped fund part of the sabbatical, and a part-time minister fulfilled some of the minister’s pastoral duties.

⁴ From Mark Miller-McLemore, “The Dark Side of Sabbatical,” found at: <https://www.faithandleadership.com/dark-side-sabbatical>

⁵ Ibid.

Yet another minister walked the Camino de Santiago during her sabbatical. When a family member died unexpectedly toward the end of the pilgrimage, the church worked with the minister to navigate both the conclusion of the sabbatical at a later time, and offered pastoral care and sensitivity during the most intense grieving period.

One minister reported that during his sabbatical, he “slept and slept and slept – it was amazing how exhausted I was.” This turned out to be a common experience.

SUMMARY

Sabbaticals are times of refreshment, nourishment, and refocusing ministry for both a minister and a congregation. Diligent planning and clear communication can maximize the benefits of sabbaticals, all towards the goal of faithful ministry that changes lives.



resources and case studies

FUNDING A SABBATICAL

Funding for a sabbatical can happen in a variety of ways. Churches should set aside some portion of their annual budget toward a sabbatical fund, which can be used to pay for pastoral coverage during the sabbatical time and provide some additional resources for the pastor. The budget for the pastor’s continuing education may be applied to the sabbatical if the sabbatical plan includes a continuing education component. The pastor should also expect to contribute their own money toward the sabbatical.

Several organizations that offer sabbatical grants include:

- Lilly Endowment, Inc.
As of 2017, the Lilly Endowment was offering renewal grants for pastors and congregations. “Eligible congregations will be able to apply for grants of up to \$50,000 each to support a renewal program for their pastor. Up to \$15,000 of the grant may be used for congregational expenses associated with the renewal program.” <http://www.cpx.cts.edu/renewal>
<http://www.cpx.cts.edu/renewal/apply/national-program>

- The Louisville Institute
As of 2017, the Louisville Institute offers a Pastoral Study Grant of up to \$15,000 to “pursue a pressing question related to Christian life, faith and ministry. Grants are available for study projects involving full or partial leave from job responsibilities.” <https://louisville-institute.org/programs-grants-and-fellowships/grants/>
- UCC Seminaries
Some of the UCC-related seminaries offer a pastor-in-residence program. Some are stipended. Since these vary widely from school to school (and sometimes from year to year), interested candidates should contact the schools directly.
- The Bush Foundation
The Bush Foundation in St. Paul has a “Leadership Fellows Program” for residents of Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, or one of the 23 Native nations that shares the same geographic area. They are “excited about and committed to supporting and developing leaders who are increasingly better equipped and networked to effectively lead change. These leaders think bigger and think differently about what is possible in their communities. Bush Fellows possess a vision for strengthening the common good within the region and are devoted to making that vision a reality.” Pastors are eligible, and the fellowships are up to \$100,000 to be used for 18-24 months. <http://www.bushfoundation.org/fellowships/bush-fellowship-program>
- UCC Partners in Service
Long-term volunteer opportunities available through the United Church of Christ, including places to serve during sabbaticals. <http://www.ucc.org/partners-in-service>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Bullock, A. Richard and Richard J. Bruesehoff. *Clergy Renewal: The Alban Guide to Sabbatical Planning*. Alban Institute, 2000.

Miller-McLemore, Mark. “The Dark Side of Sabbatical,” found at: <http://www.faithandleadership.com/content/the-dark-side-sabbatical>.

Oswald, Roy. “Why You Should Give Your Pastor a Sabbatical.” (VHS with leader’s guide) Alban Institute, 2001. *While this resource has not been updated to DVD, it has a wealth of information that is still cited in most other denominational resources.*

Sevier, Melissa Bane. *Journeying Toward Renewal: A Spiritual Companion for Pastoral Sabbaticals*. Alban Institute, 2002.

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