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*Ministering to the
Needs of Your Minister*



Sabbaticals
for Ministers:

*The Benefits for Pastors
and Congregations*

A Pastor's Advocate Series booklet

Sabbaticals *for* Ministers: *The Benefits for Pastors and Congregations*

by Dale Wolyniak



Series edited by Dan Davidson

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Sabbaticals for Ministers

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- A pastor in a small town in the rural West took a one-month sabbatical after five years of ministry. This was about the only benefit the pastor received, but it was a fruitful endeavor and resulted in a new perspective on ministry. The church and board both accepted the concept, and it allowed for them to have new voices sharing the Word of God during that month. Their main concern was who would do the work of the ministry on weekdays. In time, however, a plan that spread the work around to several lay leaders was developed and followed.

- Another senior pastor took a three-month sabbatical, which was a part of a personnel policy. It was a time of refreshment and inspiration. However, there was a lot of concern about the coverage that would be needed during his time away. He and the other church leaders realized that expectations were often too high to be shared efficiently. Thus, the delegation of duties was problematic. Eventually, the decision was made that a seasoned interim pastor would be a better fit for the extended leave, instead of relying on volunteers and associate staff.



- One minister took a self-funded sabbatical for six months. This time away was not for academic pursuits or for personal enhancement or

accomplishment (something that would normally be considered in a continuing education benefit of compensation). It was to be a time of rest and renewal, but it did end up as a hardship on his family's finances. It took the pastor about three weeks to come to terms with the tension that had built up in him over eight years of pastoral ministry. But eventually, a sense of normalcy and humanness returned, and the minister was able to think and reflect without being rushed or feeling on edge emotionally. The time off allowed

his body and soul to rest and to recover from the strain and drain of ministry. A newness of life, a greater awareness of simple things, gentler moments and deeper spiritual insights were then demonstrated by the minister and his family upon their return.

There is joy in ministering to people within the context of church life. The depth of relationships that a pastor experiences with his people is unmatched in any other vocation. It can be consuming in its satisfaction. Yet,

with this calling comes the challenge of hearing the voice of God through a cacophony of voices clamoring for attention. The concepts of rest and renewal are foundational to healthy ministers and congregations. Ministers need Sabbath rests so they can minister with a new freshness, a new vitality. Sabbaticals—extended time off from regular schedules and committee

meetings—can serve as a detoxification from the to-do lists, demands and expectations of pastoral care.

Leviticus 25:4 reads, “In the seventh year the land is to have a sabbath of rest, a sabbath to the LORD.” This command to Israel concerning the soil allowed the fields to recover so they would keep producing food. Without it, the land would essentially wear out and become useless. Similarly, an extended rest is the secret to longevity in ministry and to maintaining spiritual, mental and physical health. Sabbaticals make room for God! They are made possible by trusting that other members of the church, with the help of God, can take care of things while the pastor is resting, reflecting and being renewed.

To sustain Christian ministry, its leadership needs renewal and rest, a time to “be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). By slowing down for a time, both church leaders and their congregations can come to know and obey God in new ways.

The History of Sabbaticals

Sabbaticals originate from the biblical concept of Sabbath. The importance of rest and renewal is recognized today in academia and business, but sabbaticals for those in ministry have some distinct differences.

The biblical concept of Sabbath

The Bible holds the key to understanding the concept of Sabbath rest for both God and humanity. In Genesis 2:2-3, it is stated that God rested from His labors on the seventh day. Although it is not called a Sabbath here, the concept is strikingly clear. God rested! Even the Creator took time to reflect on His work and rest from it. And, since He certainly did not require such rest, we must assume this was intended to model the value of rest for us. Later we see, in the giving of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8), that keeping the Sabbath day holy was included as a covenant requirement for Israel. Rather than do more work, produce more goods or be involved in

What the Bible Says About the Sabbath

“Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.” Exodus 20:8, KJV

“There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, a day of sacred assembly.” Leviticus 23: 3

“Then he [Jesus] said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.’ ” Mark 2:27

“Then Jesus said to them, ‘The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.’ ” Luke 6:5

Other key passages to explore: Genesis 1—2; Psalm 23:2-3; Exodus 20:8-11; 23:10-12; Mark 2:27-28; Leviticus 25:1-7 (Sabbath Year); Leviticus 25:8-55 (Year of Jubilee); Ecclesiastes 3:1-8.

commerce, man was commanded to rest. *Sabbath* means to stop, repose, cease, celebrate, leave, put down or away.¹ In Greek, the word is *sabbaton*, “day of weekly repose.”² In this context, the seventh day of each person’s life should be set aside for nothing but rest and recovery.

Rest prepares one to do the work of life, of one’s calling. Unless there is rest for individuals, work eventually becomes tedious and reluctant. Rest was intended to bring about a respite from the common, regular and relentless routines of living. An extended concept of sabbaticals gives special place to creating extended quiet times, reflective moments, along with new vision and passion for life in Christ. A sabbatical provides substantial time in which God is allowed to speak into our deepest spiritual recesses and bring cleansing, renewal and hope.

The secular concept of sabbaticals

Sabbaticals have been practiced in two primary arenas outside of ministry: academia and business. We will take a quick look at how these areas developed the concept of sabbaticals for their leadership and staff.

The academic arena

Traditionally, the academic world has honored its professors, teachers and staff with sabbaticals. Universities established the practice of sabbaticals as a means of reward and encouragement for those found eligible, who served in that community and earned tenure. Within these corridors of higher education, faculty are given time off or a leave of absence to pursue planned

and detailed academic interests, research and development. Provision is made for their full support, and often a stipend is available to assist in travel and other aspects of this planned leave. In this arena, a project, product or advanced degree is often considered the objective of the sabbatical.

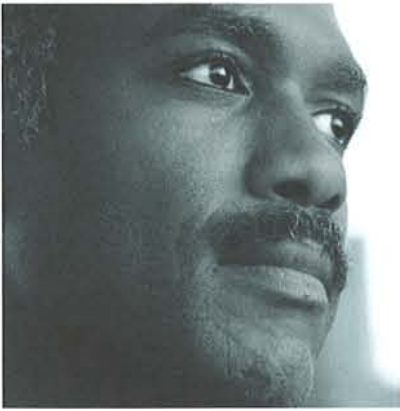
William F. Brosend II, program director of the Louisville Institute, says, “An academic sabbatical is about the product, and a pastoral one is about the person.”³ (The Louisville Institute assists churches with grants to fund sabbaticals for their ministers.) The church is usually more concerned about the rest, restoration and renewal of a pastor than about his completion of an advanced educational program or other work during his time away.

The business arena

Over the last several decades, business and commerce have found sabbaticals to be a great tool to retain productive and committed workers. By giving leave for study, rest, travel or other planned activities, big business has been able to build strong leadership teams. Today, sabbaticals are a key

What Is a Sabbatical?

- An extended leave from ordinary work
- A period of rest for the body, mind and soul
- A time for renewal and development of relationships, with God and others



component of compensation packages used to attract and retain quality talent.

A sabbatical “is re-energizing that lasts more than a day,” notes Richard Floersch, chief people officer and executive vice president for worldwide human resources at McDonald’s. “Depending on what they do while they are

gone, they come back even more skilled and talented than when they left.”⁴ Writes *The Business Shrink*: “With McDonald’s paving the road to sabbatical freedom, other major corporations followed, like Nike, Intel, American Express, IBM, AT&T and more.”⁵

According to a *New York Times* article, “The Families and Work Institute, a nonprofit research group, surveyed 1,100 companies with 50 or more employees for its *2008 National Study of Employers*. It found that 24 percent of small companies (under 100 workers) and 33 percent of companies with 1,000 or more workers allowed paid or unpaid sabbaticals of six months or more.”⁶

So, we see that businesses and corporations have embraced the concept of sabbatical and are using it to recruit and retain valued employees. Many of

these companies see the importance of investing in their people, which in the end is an investment in the future of the company.

The uniqueness of ministry sabbaticals

A ministry sabbatical is ideally quite different from a traditional academic sabbatical or a sabbatical practiced in business. It is about the spirit and soul being refreshed, renewed and redirected. Eugene H. Peterson states:

If we are going to take sabbaticals, let them be real sabbaticals: a willed passivity in order to be restored to alert receptivity to spirit—prayer, silence, solitude, worship. It is outrageous that we acquiesce to the world’s definition of our word and let our unique, biblical sabbatical be put to the use of career advancement, psychological adjustment, and intellectual polish—with all the prayer and contemplation laundered out. The original intent of Sabbath is a time to be silent and listen to God, not attend lectures; a time to be in solitude and to be with God, not “interact” with fatigued peers. If help is to be given to the pastor in midcourse, it is not going to come by infusion of intellect, but by renewal of spirit.⁷

The church is about people and their spiritual well-being. Pastors also need time to develop greater intimacy with God and rediscover that ministry is about grace, not just works. A sabbatical, like the Sabbath, establishes breathing room from their busy lives so God can speak. It is also a time of reflection and

admission that they are not indispensable—and that's okay. There comes a recognition that our dependency is on God and not on ourselves.

Misconceptions about sabbaticals

- *It's the same as a vacation.* Many churches think of a sabbatical as merely a long vacation. However, a sabbatical differs significantly from a vacation in many aspects. It is a time of solitude with God, a respite for improving one's health. It is not for career enhancement, for accomplishing intentional goals or objectives (such as continuing education, educational degrees or research for a paper or book), for being involved with more people, or for reporting on one's every move. It should be a time to truly and completely disconnect from routines, responsibilities and relationships.
- *We can't afford it.* With adequate planning, funds can be directed, raised and set aside to give a minister a meaningful sabbatical. In fact, it is perhaps more accurate to say that a church can't afford *not* to develop a sabbatical policy and plan. The costs of replacing leadership and the resulting downtime for the church add up to less productivity, health and ministry for God's people.
- *We are too small.* No matter how small the congregation, there are ways to manage a sabbatical. Having a long-term plan that includes finding interim ministers and setting aside funds can help make it happen. Granting even a half-paid sabbatical leave can be better than none.


- *The pastor might leave.* A written policy that explains the purpose of the sabbatical and the desire to retain the services of the leader can help alleviate such worries. For example, it would be easy to include a notation that if one does not complete a full year of ministry following a sabbatical, then the cost of the sabbatical would be prorated and charged back to the minister.



The Need for Sabbaticals

Pastoral stress

Today, the role of pastor is truly under pressure from many sides, probably more than at any other time in history. The stress that accompanies a ministry calling can have a substantial negative effect on those in this caring profession. Since over 40 percent of pastors acknowledge having *high stress levels* at least once or twice a week, and 12 percent almost every



day,⁸ there is a need to bring healing, hope and renewal to those called “pastor.” The calling to become a pastor brings with it a plethora of demands and expectations that inadvertently have an effect on both the leader and his family. Pastors are overworked, are always on the clock and almost always find themselves multitasking. Many of the responsibilities they assume are emotionally and spiritually draining. The corrosive and accumulative effects of being in the “people” business often include health issues, as well as spiritual and emotional wounds.

Sabbaticals offer leaders a change of pace, a chance to slow their activity level, even a complete rest long enough to be strengthened and healed. That time away is most effective when it is included in a compensation agreement, when it is required by a caring congregation. Many ministers are facing burnout, yet they are reluctant to make that fact known even to their own leadership team, let alone the congregation.

We all know that ministry is never finished, and often a frenetic pace draws caregivers in, damaging and making their ministry efforts ineffective. A tired, discouraged and worn-out minister is a poor advertisement for kingdom values. And a pastor's family that is on the brink of falling apart not only needs healing itself but sends the wrong message to both the church and the community.

The high burnout rate among clergy indicates that ministers are generally not rested, renewed, refreshed or rewarded for their efforts in meeting the needs of congregations. Many are leaving their first calling to follow less

stressful pursuits. How is the church to minister to its ministers? What can church leadership boards do to assist in the healing of the heart, head and hands of its faithful staff? Is there something that can help both the pastor and the congregation? Can we honor ministers for their years of service? Yes! Simply developing a sabbatical plan would bring some hope and encouragement to both clergy and congregants.

Pastoral overload

Pastors face a never-ending list of activities, counseling sessions, sermons and lesson plans, as well as civic and community outreach. Weddings, funerals and family tragedies at all hours of the day and night wear out these servants. Always in the spotlight, some ministers are barely holding on as they seek ways to survive, let alone thrive, in the midst of ministering in the 21st century. There is a certain “heaviness of the call” that often is not balanced with time for family, friends, hobbies and self—things that every human being needs.

Unlike a doctor or lawyer, who can schedule or refer clients to another peer for services, a minister is less likely to say no or “not now” to the people he has come to love. The shepherd's heart for his flock will often prevent a pastor from referring someone in need to another church, minister or professional for counsel or help. This sense of always being on call, of feeling indispensable and irreplaceable, can have a devastating effect on both a minister's health and his family's well-being.

In Focus on the Family's *Pastoral Ministries 2009 Survey* (an informal, non-scientific poll), nearly half of the pastors reported working 50 or more hours a week, and 15.5 percent said they worked at least 60 hours a week on average.⁹ These figures point to a serious problem, one that can have ruinous effects unless checked and changed. A sabbatical rest, along with a personal weekly Sabbath, can ensure that ministers achieve a balanced approach to pastoral care and help them finish well.

One denominational leader discovered that the most frequent descriptions of ministerial life by those under his care were that it was too fast-paced and not focused enough on God. Such portrayals by spiritual leaders are disconcerting, and the church body needs to hear and respond with grace.

Of course, we must recognize that it is the pastor who ultimately has control over his time. One cannot blame others for an overactive scheduler. Taking control of one's time is the responsibility of the leader himself. But if you step into your pastor's shoes for just one day, you will quickly realize that the unrealistic expectations and overwhelming demands of people whom he loves make it very difficult to set the limits and boundaries even he knows are wise. When the congregation recognizes and understands these facts, it must also take responsibility for protecting and helping its leaders.

Sabbaticals allow for breathing room, for freedom from details, for a renewal of heart, mind and soul. Churches that promote extended leaves of absence for their ministry teams show grace and understanding. They help ministers safely step aside from the treadmill of overpacked schedules,

time demands and the deep emotional and spiritual involvement with their members. They allow their spiritual leaders to take a hard and honest look at their lives and efforts during a sabbatical time away and to restore balance and purpose to both personal and ministry life.

The Benefits for Churches and Clergy

Many of the blessings that a sabbatical can bring to a minister have already been mentioned. But when the subject of a sabbatical comes up in board meetings, one of the primary questions that arises is "What benefit will it offer to the church itself?" In this section, let's summarize the benefits for both church *and* clergy.

Congregations benefit from sabbaticals in the following ways:

- They find a new appreciation for their minister, in his or her absence, realizing the multiple responsibilities, tasks and assignments in which their minister has been engaged. In most cases, the congregation will be surprised at how much their pastor does and will wonder how he gets it all done. Sometimes, they will discover the opposite. In either case, there is value in better understanding what it is like to be a pastor of this congregation. When the pastor returns, he or she often finds a congregation with a whole new heart.





- Congregations gain a new understanding of how well the church body can function as a whole. Churches have individuals who, given the opportunity, will share their gifts and fill in the gap. This is a proving ground for up-and-coming leaders, spiritually gifted laity and volunteers. Volunteer involvement has been found to increase as a result of a pastor's sabbatical.
- Congregants will often lessen their dependency on the minister. They will better understand the ongoing balance that is necessary between the work of the clergy and the work of the laity. They may realize their own need to draw closer to Christ during this extended season of pastoral leave. Having come to expect the minister to be there for



them, people may discover that their dependency needs to be on God instead.

- Sabbaticals help retain ministers who know the flock, the community and the dynamics that have taken years to achieve. Churches can expect to see longer pastorates when sabbaticals are given. Retention of ministers goes up when a pastor and a congregation learn to care for one another. Many ministers leave their posts due to stress, unresolved conflict or a sense of burnout. Without time off and time for renewal, ministers leave exhausted, depressed and defeated. The Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth has consistently shown that “the most effective, growing churches are led by pastors with a long tenure. Pastors who ‘stick with’ a church through good times and rough times gain a level of credibility and respect that allows them to challenge the church to take risks necessary for growth.”¹⁰
- Churches find a refreshed minister upon his or her return.

Ministers benefit from sabbaticals in the following ways:

- Ministers grow into a deeper relationship with God. It has been commonly stated that a congregation grows only to the depth of its pastoral leadership. Leaders need to be ahead of their flock.

- Ministers have time to decompress from the pressures, demands and expectations of ministry. Separation from the demands of ministry allows time to reflect on what is really important. Renewed emotional, physical and spiritual health are common outcomes.
- Ministers have the time to clearly evaluate their calling and fit, as well as time to explore ways of doing life and ministry differently and more creatively. Sometimes, a mentor can assist here. When sabbaticals are more than three months long, pastors return with a sharper perspective on the essentials of ministry.
- Clergy find a new commitment to their calling. After a sabbatical, ministers often express a stronger passion for their role, and this enhances job performance.
- A new self-awareness grows as a minister's personal relationship with God deepens and is given a chance to be refreshed. The opportunity to seek out new avenues of creativity gives ministers a fresh lease on life and a new world to explore.
- A healthy minister is more apt to minister in grace than one who is burned out or in conflict. Confidence in God's goodness and provision can bolster productivity.
- Longer pastorates can be expected if a sabbatical policy is in place.

What Happens on a Sabbatical?

A sabbatical is a time of extended leave governed by stated objectives. The big three objectives are *planned rest*, *meaningful activities* and *the pursuit of God*.

Planned rest

By "planned" we mean that the minister and his leadership team have taken time to discuss and clearly articulate what the sabbatical will look like and how it is to be worked out. This plan is an accountability tool for both parties, the church and the pastor. It gives parameters that help establish the amount of time to be taken, the activities to be engaged in or avoided, and the expected outcomes. There, of course, must be room in any plan for the



unexpected and for the moving of the Holy Spirit. God directs the steps and may indeed intervene for His own purposes.

Taking time off in a sabbatical leave is actually giving God time and space to develop a stronger relationship with the minister. A sabbatical can bring deeper understanding of God himself that might not normally take place. A primary objective of a sabbatical for ministers is to heal the body, soul and spirit.

It is also a time for God to reveal. An agenda that is too active can thwart the rest that allows a pastor to gain direction from God. Rest and recovery from a lifestyle of total engagement and commitments happens in any good sabbatical. The minister must intentionally step aside, releasing the obligations, responsibilities and activities of pastoral life. He must listen for the still, small voice and watch for the pillar of fire.

Meaningful activities

Some pastors want to experience a new culture, do some traveling, learn a new skill or develop talents in which they once only dabbled. Reflection and refocusing can be enhanced by simple activities like reading, writing or spiritual reflecting at some site, similar to that of the monks or mystics of the past. This is a time for renewal of spirit. Although it is possible to pursue professional development, it should not become a time of rigorous intellectual effort. Again, recall that this is about the person, not about a publication or other project. Any agenda is possible, as long as the minister and the church agree on it.

Flexibility is the key to using this time wisely. Avoid a highly structured plan that precludes spontaneity. Taking time to reconnect with and know one's spouse better through shared experiences can bring new intimacy to a stale relationship.

Pursuit of God

To learn again to hear the Spirit speaking is an important objective of taking a sabbatical. The goal is to set aside demands, responsibilities and opportunities, and to concentrate on being the man or woman of God that He intended and clearly hear His voice once again.

This is a time to renew one's call, purpose and identity in Christ. Pastor Melissa Sevier told her congregation after a sabbatical, "Whereas I previously wondered if I would be able to remain here at all, the time away has indeed renewed my call to this particular place.... I simply don't feel as though we have accomplished all we have been called to do together."¹¹

Note the use of "we" and "together." To Pastor Sevier, ministry was not just about the minister, but about the body of Christ. A renewal of calling tends to get to the root of purpose and commitment, and time off to consider such is the tool that gets the job done. Another minister stated that his sabbatical gave him time to deal with self-identity issues, and he came back with greater confidence in Christ and a new commitment to the ministry.

This time is also for reflection upon the grace and goodness of God. Restoration takes place when we have time to see and understand where God has taken us, used us and allowed us to share in ministry. It is a time when, in some ways, God pursues us and brings healing, hope and wholeness.

Planning for a Sabbatical

With a sabbatical policy in place as part of a minister's compensation, the next step is to jointly plan and prepare for the extended time. This is a mutual venture and is best established when both the pastor and the church board work out the details together. Planning and preparing should be as detailed as possible for those covering the minister's responsibilities. Planning of the actual sabbatical time needs to flow with the minister's family and personal needs.

Three considerations

There are three primary considerations when planning and implementing a sabbatical, and they focus on the items that most affect the church and congregation, namely finances, leadership roles and evaluation.

Finances

In any sabbatical, there are real costs involved. Each church and minister will need to address this critical issue, and no one plan or policy fits all.

Funds may be used for hiring an interim pastor or for additional staff to cover administrative details. Also, money for extended travel and other activities of the minister should be considered. Creativity is needed when it comes to raising funds for a sabbatical leave. There are numerous ways in which churches can establish a sabbatical fund, but they all require discipline. Some ideas:

- Consider adding \$100 a month to a special fund for five years, which results in \$6,000 to be used for sabbatical costs.
- Establish a 13-month salary schedule for the pastor within the church budget, so the 13th paycheck can be set aside for future sabbatical use. After six years, the minister will have income for a six-month sabbatical.
- Apply for a grant from a foundation or a ministry that will cover part or all of a sabbatical's expenses.
- Don't be afraid to experiment with shorter sabbaticals given more frequently.
- Look for creative ways to raise funds to assist the minister and his or her family with travel costs, retreats, books and fun money.

Leadership roles

Churches must decide who will lead the congregation while the minister is

on a sabbatical. Addressing this concern takes planning and cooperation well in advance. Congregations need to be informed that there is a workable plan in place, with plenty of laity buy-in. Consensus within the church leadership team, committee or board needs to be built so that appropriate individuals are delegated to cover for the minister on leave.

A couple of questions here may help: Who will do the main preaching and teaching, counseling and crisis ministries? Who will handle the daily and weekly logistics that the pastor may have been taking care of, such as closure of buildings and general upkeep? Who will step in to help with congregational visitation, including hospital, nursing home and prison visits? How will other duties normally covered by the pastor be handled?

Some churches extend responsibilities by putting part-time paid staff into a full-time mode. Others find qualified volunteers and elders whose gift and abilities match the need. Some churches seek out retired ministers or seminary students to fill various roles. An interim minister, as well as all volunteers, should be given a document that clearly describes responsibilities and reporting mechanisms, as well as any remuneration. Communication here is essential for the transitions in leadership.

Accountability, evaluation and reporting

A pastor returning from a sabbatical leave needs to give an assessment of the time off, with a goal of explaining the benefits, discoveries, new vision and resulting state of mind, heart and body. Such a report helps the congregation and church board understand how the extended leave helped the minister

and his or her family. Normally, this report would be due a month after resuming responsibilities, to allow time to review and see with different eyes how the sabbatical affected the minister. It may help if the minister shares in public with a series of messages over time.

The church also needs to identify any lessons learned during the minister's absence, thereby establishing credible evidence of the benefits of planned sabbaticals. It is a shared learning experience, and everyone is affected and changed in different ways. Expressing new insights into God's provision for the church and its pastor brings a new closeness and appreciation.



What church leadership teams, boards and congregations need to know

- Churches that have a sabbatical policy in their bylaws indicate they are aware of the special calling and demands of ministry and give their backing to the sabbatical concept. Having a written policy and plan

lends authority and support, as well as outlining the steps to carry out a sabbatical. (See a sample policy at the end of this booklet.)

- With a plan in place, many churches begin considering a minister's extended leave up to 12 months prior to the actual sabbatical. This gives everyone time to discuss it, raise funds and plan the delegation of duties.



- The church board and paid staff must be on the same page regarding who is eligible for a sabbatical, and when. Agreement on how long one must be in ministry before taking an extended leave eliminates having to deal with individual requests.

Defining Eligibility: Who is eligible for a sabbatical? The general norm has been that those who have served in their present role

at least five to seven years are eligible for a sabbatical. In keeping with the Sabbath concept, six years seems to be a standard, with the seventh year being the sabbatical year. However, it is also common for a sabbatical to be based on the total number of years a pastor has served in ministry, including those at previous churches. A sabbatical policy should clearly define who is eligible and how the plan can be implemented. Such a document will help define what is considered full-time ministry and will identify all staff, including associate ministers, who are eligible. Such a plan will involve the church leadership team and the minister(s), so all parties are aware of the policy's parameters.

- Sabbaticals do cost money. Normally, the pastoral salary and benefits continue. Funds may also be needed for a fill-in minister or extra help to handle administrative duties. Identifying what money is available, or can be raised, is the task of wise management. There is also the possibility of locating outside funding.
- Another concern for churches is who will do the work of the ministry. While the pastor was initially called to do much of it, the apostle Paul told Timothy, "The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2). Appropriate delegation of responsibilities to qualified people within the congregation will reduce anxiety. When the minister *publicly recognizes* those who have been delegated such responsibility, he helps establish lines of authority in

his absence. In addition, planning for emergency situations—such as funerals—will bring added security and peace to members.

- Some fellowships have advocated that the minister on sabbatical report to a mentor or sabbatical committee. Others ask for occasional updates for the church bulletin. Some require a re-entry report. This accounting helps identify what was beneficial or problematic, and what changed during the sabbatical. Both the church and the minister need to evaluate the time of separation, including ministry activities and accomplishments.
- One of the concerns of a sabbatical is the level of involvement by the minister's family. Will the spouse and children also be a part of the sabbatical? Some ministers have spouses who work and children who are in school. Taking time away may not be possible for these family members. Other ministers try to make the sabbatical a time for family. A minister's family may feel that he or she is always away at church functions and now, with a sabbatical, will be gone again! Due consideration to family's specific needs should be made so that they, too, gain help from the process.

What pastors and churches should consider

- When should a sabbatical *not* be taken or given? When major church or personal issues are being wrestled with, it is unwise to take an extended leave. Further, a sabbatical should not be taken if the

minister is on the edge of burnout and needs professional counseling, not just rest.

- The church calendar and holidays need to be considered prior to setting a time for an extended leave.
- If a pastor is thinking about leaving the church, then it would be unfair to take a sabbatical knowing that, upon return, he or she will be moving to another position elsewhere. Here is where a policy can state a course of action if the minister does not complete an agreed-upon length of time after the sabbatical. In the event that a minister resigns upon his return, some churches require the minister to pay back, at a prorated value, a portion of funds expended during the sabbatical.

What ministers need to know and do

- Educate your congregation about sabbaticals. Keep talking and informing your church about the sabbatical plan and how it benefits everyone. Build consensus, understanding and trust. Give out booklets and articles. Develop a strong, supportive sabbatical committee that will promote the sabbatical to the congregation. Reassure the congregation that there is a plan with sufficient detail in place to carry on the work of ministry during the sabbatical.
- Having a plan in place that describes the focus of a sabbatical can help give direction and guidance. Some plans are too busy, so there

should be boundaries for the sabbatical. Remember that it is ideally about the needs of a person, and not about a product. Put a plan in writing and share it with your sabbatical committee, board or mentor.

- Reporting to a mentor or a committee helps insure transparency and will keep you on track. Nonetheless, the sabbatical is *the minister's* time, and he or she should not be required to apprise church members and boards of every sabbatical activity.
- Don't forget that this is what it is all about: retreat, refresh, renew, return.
- This is not a vacation, nor a time of continuing education. This is a gift of time! (Ask for it, carve it out, use it wisely.)
- Determine how much the pastor's family can be involved when members are in school or hold jobs. Find a way. Some ministers tack on a vacation at the start. In any event, consideration needs to be given to the family: Where will the spouse and children attend church during this time? Can the family join in the sabbatical? Considerations of work, school and family relationships must be dealt with for a more wholesome sabbatical outcome that addresses the unique needs of the entire family.

Reconnecting After the Sabbatical

Transition back into ministry can often be stressful, so adjustments need to be made and grace extended. Things have changed. People have stepped up in ministry, and now those responsibilities may need to be redelegated.

What has helped in some churches is to have an open meeting, or several smaller ones, chaired by a board member or other lay leader, in which positive discussion and sharing can take place regarding how the sabbatical worked, individually and corporately. Here are some suggested topics to cover.

For the pastor to share with the congregation

- Discuss what was beneficial and most helpful. Share stories, journal entries, pictures. Include the entire family.
- Show appreciation to all. Meet with individuals who covered for you, and do an assessment interview. Bless your congregation and church board for making your sabbatical possible.
- Celebrate with your congregation new insights and understandings related to your spiritual life, identity in Christ and vision for the future.

- Share what you will do to stay healthy in all respects. Once back in the thick of things, a minister coming off of a sabbatical will have developed some new and healthy habits. Sevier says, "My renewed commitment and call to stay in this church requires me to find new sources of energy and freshness." ¹² Maintaining activities that helped one recover should be adopted and implemented to extend the impact of the sabbatical.
- Work with the church board to redefine ministry job descriptions.



For the congregation to share with the minister

- Discuss what was beneficial. What did the congregation learn during this time? Who stepped up? Give them opportunity to share their insights. Mutual sharing here is important, as the congregation also had a sabbatical, during which things were different than normal. Consider how the church missed its minister! How do you feel? What did you learn?
- Update the minister on church activities. It is time for the minister to catch up on how the congregation has been doing, and where they are now after their sabbatical journey. Questions, interviews and staff meetings can all help bring a fresh report to the table. Notice that this is a time for talking about what worked in a safe and genuine setting. It is also a time to affirm each other. Trials may have come, conflicts may have taken place, but now is a time to get the big picture. God did provide grace and help!
- What did *not* work? There are bound to have been a few crises, and these need to be discussed in a smaller setting. Meeting privately with those who were given authority and responsibility can minimize any negative impact.
- Let your minister know that you want him or her to take time adjusting back to a full schedule.

- Develop new ways of understanding that ministry is a “team effort.” It is all about God’s grace to us. Share victories, challenges and insights from your church sabbatical.
- Celebrate, have a dinner and say, “Welcome back!”

Conclusion

Churches and clergy tend to stay healthy and grow when all parties recognize that ministry takes its toll on any leadership team. By establishing policies for sabbaticals, churches can retain their pastors, and pastors can develop lasting ministries because they have been honored with the gift of time. By developing a plan, with the primary goal of allocating a large amount of time for rest and restoration, churches can help their ministers and congregations to be healthier. Sabbaticals can and should be incorporated into every pastoral compensation package, not only as a means of recruitment, but also for retention. Sabbaticals also bring hope and healing to the congregation. When sabbaticals are carefully planned, then it is truly a gift that keeps on giving.

H.B. London and Neil B. Wiseman, in their book *Becoming Your Favorite Church*,¹³ suggest 49 ways to “love your pastor.” They say that each of these realistic approaches to loving your minister shows “affirmation, appreciation and admiration.” We would add that a sabbatical incorporates the same spirit and affection.

Churches experiencing their own sabbatical alongside that of their minister also gain perspective and understanding of their own calling as a body to be a part of the ministry team. Churches gain a new freedom from old habits of dependency, and enter into a new season of cooperation with both God and the leader or leaders He has placed among them.

We hope that this booklet has provided a meaningful and helpful overview of sabbaticals, showing why they are important for ministers and congregations alike. We hope that your church will establish a policy and plan for sabbaticals that will be workable and beneficial to all concerned. Below you will find lists of books and Web sites for further development of sabbatical policies and plans, as well as possible funding resources.

Be sure also to visit our Web site, *The Parsonage*,[®] at parsonage.org for numerous articles, referrals to caregiving ministries for pastoral families, and other helpful items for pastoral care.

May you and your church be like the apostle Paul, who stated:

“If only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me.” Acts 20:24

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” 2 Timothy 4:7

➤

Pastors, you have more than a job. You have a high calling, a special role and responsibility that God has given you. But you are only human. May you and your church body recognize the need for Sabbath rest and adopt the concept of sabbaticals for the renewal of your mind, body and soul and for the further ministry of the church.

Church leadership teams, you have a great opportunity to encourage your ministers. By developing a sabbatical policy and plan, you can enrich, expand and enlarge church ministries and, at the same time, show love and respect to these servants of the Lord.

References and Resources

Endnotes

¹ Strong, James, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, word numbers 7673, 7676

² Strong, word number 4521

³ Tracy Schier, "Clergy Renewal Programs (Part I): Taking Time to Renew Ministerial Vocations," from the Web site *Resources for American Christianity*, resourcingchristianity.org

⁴ Hillary Chura, "Sabbaticals Aren't Just for Academics Anymore," nytimes.com/2006/04/22/business/22sabbaticals.html

⁵ See: businessshrink.biz/psychologyofbusiness/2008/02/26/sabbatical-reinvigorating-employees-and-preventing-layoffs/

⁶ Alina Tugend, "The Best Time to Ask for a Sabbatical Could Be Now," nytimes.com/2009/04/11/your-money/household-budgeting/11shortcuts.html

⁷ Peterson, Eugene H. "Sabbatical Is Not Study Leave." *Leadership Journal*, Winter 1988: 74-75.

⁸ "The Presbyterian Panel Report: Background Report for the 1997-1999 Presbyterian Panel," Louisville: Research Services, Presbyterian Church (USA), 2000.

⁹ Focus on the Family *Pastoral Ministries 2009 Survey*, p. 18

¹⁰ Dr. Chuck Lawless, "Diagnose your church's health: Are leaders committed to the ministry of the church?" <http://www.churchcentral.com/article.php?id=2713>

¹¹ Sevier, Melissa. *Journeying Toward Renewal: A Spiritual Companion for Pastoral Sabbaticals*. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2002. p. 78.

¹² Sevier, p. 96.

¹³ London, H.B., and Wiseman, Neil B. *Becoming Your Favorite Church*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2002. p. 224.

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Wolyniak, Dale M. *Finishing Well: Focusing on the Essentials for Ministry Health*. Peyton, CO: Peak Vista Press, 2008.

Video (VHS)

Oswald, Roy M. *Why You Should Give Your Pastor a Sabbatical*. Alban Institute. ISBN 1-56699-247-8

Web sites

Barnabas International: barnabas.org Missionary resource with articles

Barna Research: barna.org Church-related articles, surveys

Concordia College: www.cord.edu/Offices/Charis/clergy1.php

Ellison Research: ellisonresearch.com

Focus on the Family, *The Parsonage*: parsonage.org Listings of retreat centers, counseling and information for those needing rest, help and encouragement. Also the *Pastoral Ministries 2009 Survey* (parsonage.org/images/pdf/2009PMSurvey.pdf)

Impact Leader: impactleader.org Articles on sabbaticals for mission leaders

Lilly Endowment: clergyrenewal.org Possible funding for sabbaticals

Louisville Institute: louisville-institute.org Possible funding for sabbaticals

Pinnacle Ministries: pinmin.org Articles on sabbaticals

Resources for American Christianity: resourcingchristianity.org Grant making

Wheat Ridge Ministries: http://www.wheatridge.org/site/c.khLSKZPDLoF/b.2144681/k.967D/Sabbatical_Grants.htm Apply for a sabbatical grant. (Program suspended for FY 2010.)

Your Sabbatical: yoursabbatical.com Business approach with a great list of books and articles. Partial listing of companies that give paid sabbaticals: yoursabbatical.com/bold-workplaces/who-offer-sabbaticals/

Retreat centers

parsonage.org/care/ministries/index.cfm

Sample Sabbatical Policy

Here is a sample policy. It establishes the concept of a sabbatical and gives voice to the intention of the church. It is *not* a plan, but a policy, and gives both church and clergy a basic framework and procedure to implement a ministerial sabbatical.

Sabbatical Policy

Our church recognizes the calling and commitment of our ministers to the tasks of shepherding the church of Jesus Christ. We therefore establish this policy of sabbatical to honor, esteem and bring encouragement to our pastoral staff for further ministry to our congregation and community.

A sabbatical for church ministers at _____ Church shall be as follows:

1. Approval for a sabbatical for full-time staff ministers is made by the Board of Elders. * Submission will be made 12 months prior to the beginning of the leave time.

2. A minimum of five years must be served, after which a request for a sabbatical can be made.

3. Time allocated for a sabbatical shall be three months, or accrued at 1.5 days per month of service. This time must be taken all at once. Vacation time may be added to the accrued time to extend the length of the leave.

4. Full salary and benefits will be paid during the leave.

5. A full plan, including provisions for interim staffing, as well as financial considerations, shall be developed by the minister and the sabbatical committee.

6. Upon returning, the staff member shall give a report to the church board on what was achieved during the leave.

7. The minister on leave agrees to serve the church upon return for one full year or more.

8. Accrued leave time is forfeited when a pastor resigns. The church may waive this in the case of a tendered resignation.

The above items are subject to board approval.

* Underlined items are suggestions only.

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The Pastor's Advocate Series is intended to assist congregations in better understanding the needs of their pastors and pastoral families, in better caring for the personal welfare and professional well-being of these leaders, and in better teaming with them to maximize their united ministries for Christ.



Focus on the Family, Colorado Springs, CO 80995
800-A-FAMILY (232-6459) FocusOnTheFamily.com
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