

Rational and Guidelines for a Pastoral Sabbatical Policy

Sabbaticals: Are They Really Needed?

When the subject of sabbatical leave is raised, it is often met with a chorus of questions. High on the list is some form of, "Why should the pastor have a sabbatical? Neither I nor any of my work associates have one! The business world is hard, too!" While the concept of sabbaticals has long been recognized in the academic community, the church has seldom recognized their value.

The question could be raised: "Are they really necessary?" Let's address that question from a practical and Biblical perspective.

Renewal: A Break from the Pressure Cooker

In his book, "Support Your Local Pastor", Wes Roberts quotes from a revealing survey of pastors conducted by the Fuller Institute of Church Growth. This survey, as quoted by Dr. Archibald Hart of Fuller Seminary at the CareGivers Forum in November 1991, reported the following frightening statistics for pastors:

- 90% work more than forty-six hours per week, and often more than sixty.
- 80% believe that pastoral ministry is affecting their family negatively.
- 33% say that, "Being in ministry is clearly a hazard to my family."
- 75% have reported a significant crisis due to stress at least once every five years in their ministry.
- 50% feel unable to meet the needs of the job.
- 90% feel they were not adequately trained to cope with the ministry demands placed upon them.
- 40% report having a serious conflict with a parishioner at least once a month.
- 37% have been involved in inappropriate sexual behavior with someone in the church.
- 70% have a lower self-image after they've pastored than when they started.

Why, do you ask, is this true? Roberts answers with the following bit of musing:

-The lawyer can refuse to take on a client. The pastor may feel like refusing to see someone come into his congregation, but that is not his privilege.

-The doctor can refer out to another doctor when it is best for the patient - or him. The pastor is not often prone to send people to another church, though he may be thinking that in tough moments.

-The electrician can say, "I can't fix your problem for two days," and we can call the next service person on our list, who can come out right away.

The pastor (even one who is wise with his schedule) is on duty twenty-four hours a day, thirty days a month, 365 days a year. People seem to have no foresight when they experience their emergencies, when they honestly need pastoral attention. At least the ones in our lives haven't been well scheduled!

Finally, this pastor's "lament" says it well:

I am appalled at what is required of me.

I am supposed to move from sick-bed to administrative meetings,

to planning,

to supervising,

to counseling,

to praying,

to trouble-shooting,

to budgeting,

to audio systems,

to meditation,

to worship preparation,

to newsletter,

to staff problems,

to mission projects,

to conflict management,

to community leadership,

to study,

to funerals,

to weddings,

to preaching.

I am supposed to be "in charge", but not too in charge,

administrative executive,

sensitive pastor,

skillful counselor,

dynamic public speaker,

spiritual guide,
politically savvy,
intellectually sophisticated.

I am not supposed to be depressed, discouraged, cynical, angry or hurt. I am supposed to be up-beat, positive, strong, willing, Right now I am not filling any of those expectations very well. I think that's why I am tired.

One could go on and on concerning the pressures of the pastorate. One final observation should be made, however. What really sets the pastoral pressures off from the many pressures most people face in their jobs is the lack of opportunity available to relieve the building stress. In today's economic reality many pastors' wives work. With limited weekend time for family and generally a certain amount of financial stress, finding "release points" becomes an exercise in extreme creativity.

Renewal - The Biblical Perspective

The following is not to be considered an in-depth treatment, but rather the observation of a Biblical principle:

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." Exodus 20:8-11

"There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, a day of sacred assembly. You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a Sabbath to the LORD." Leviticus 23:3

"But in the seventh year the land is to have a sabbath of rest, a sabbath to the LORD. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards. Do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the grapes of your untended vines. The land is to have a year of rest. "Leviticus 25:4-5

Clearly in Scripture there is a work/rest design, both for a short-term cycle (weekly) and an extended cycle (the year of Jubilee). In fact, the extended cycle was taken so seriously that that Lord commanded the return of land to its original owners after fifty years ("In this Year of Jubilee everyone is to return to his own property." Leviticus 25:13).

One of the best examples of a "sabbatical" in the Old Testament was experienced by the prophet Elijah. In 1st Kings 19 it describes a man of God

worn out and frustrated from ministry. Elijah then was provided, and paid for by God, a 40 day period of solitude to refresh him for his next phase of ministry.

In the New Testament two important examples exist to help us see the pattern (although we don't often see them in that light). After thirty some years of living, and just before entering the most demanding and stressful time of His life, Jesus spent forty days alone to fast, pray and reflect. Furthermore, the Apostle Paul, following his conversion and earliest ministry, spent time in obscurity in his home area before Barnabas sought him out for his "life's work" (Acts 11:25).

While neither of these episodes could be called a sabbatical in any contemporary sense of the word, they illustrate a point. An investment in reflection and renewal only serves to enhance a servant of Christ's ministry. If the contemporary church is truly interested in productivity for the Kingdom, and not just in hours clocked in, we would do well to consider the example.

How Do They Work?

Perhaps the best way to begin is with what a sabbatical is not. A Sabbatical is not vacation. "Boy, twelve weeks of additional paid vacation - it must be nice!" Ask the average person in the congregation, and that is likely to be the response when confronted with the idea of a sabbatical. While a sabbatical is a time of rest, it's not vacation. **Proper sabbaticals involve a plan, a goal and accountability.** Sabbatical times, however, should be taken in addition to any earned vacation time.

It may be that earning advanced degrees is a commendable goal. Every pastor should be in the process of life-long learning. But theological education is strenuous work and not always conducive to vision building. This 'academic' view takes no account of the emotional 'burn' that may have been taking place in the life of the pastor, it makes no provision for it. The academic view takes little note of the need for wife and family to experience sabbatical as a 'living part' of the ministry, it does not allow for family renewal and my findings are that family life has been greatly strained by the ministry.

The sabbatical is a time of renewal and recharging. Roberts suggests every sabbatical should include the "8 R's": Relax, Recreation, Rest, Renewal, Revival, Rethinking, Refocusing, and Return.

The Critical List: The following are some of the critical elements of sabbatical planning.

1. **Intentionality:** Sabbaticals should not be an afterthought or a response to an emergency. They should be carefully planned so as to have maximum benefit.
2. **Time frame:** The time frame of a sabbatical can be approached from a number of perspectives. Typically, the word sabbatical connotes some time off every seven years. But in today's environment, that might be a less than optimal time. We believe that the 7-10 year range is the "sweet" spot. Secondly, most studies say that anything less than 10-12 weeks for a sabbatical doesn't really work. At 12 weeks is when your body begins to heal from the stress and pressure of work.
3. **Costs:** Sabbatical leaves incur costs to both the pastor and the church. The pastor's full salary and benefit package should continue during the sabbatical. Churches and pastor should plan appropriate "set-asides" so that both have sufficient funds to cover the experience.
4. **Continuation of Ministry:** The work needs to go on whether the pastor is present or not. This means covering not only their specific duties, but directions and leadership issues as well. Adequate plans need to be in place so that remaining staff are not overworked or required to enact decisions beyond their authority.
5. **Congregational Involvement:** The church needs to be a part of the process. They should be educated on the "why", the process, the goals and how to support the pastor during the sabbatical (prayer, money, services)
6. **Family involvement:** It's not just the pastor under pressure these days - his whole family shares the load. A good sabbatical plan will allow for some form of family renewal.
7. **Accountability:** A renewal leave is not just time off; it is time to renew. Whether the plan calls for reading, research, reflection, retreating or writing (or any combination thereof), it should be done under some form of accountability. The use of an overseer or spiritual mentor is advised. This would be an individual who would serve as a "reality check" for the person on sabbatical. This should not be a person from the leadership team of the church, and no one who has a direct vested interest in how the pastor conducts themselves.

Recommended additions to the East Hill Church Employee Manual

- 1) **Definition of Sabbatical:** The term "sabbatical" means the pastor is relieved of all routine and emergency duties during the time granted. They will have no job responsibilities whatsoever as described by their job description. Prior to the sabbatical the pastoral and church leadership will develop a plan for covering the pastor's duties during the absence.
- 2) **Qualifications:**
 - a) Any full-time Pastor will be eligible for sabbatical leave after completing a minimum of seven (7) years in his/her position as a pastor at East Hill Church.
 - b) A sabbatical leave is a privilege, not a right, and is not automatic as a condition of employment unless agreed upon at the time of hiring.
 - c) Only one pastor may be on a sabbatical during any 12 month period.
 - d) The Pastoral Leadership Team must determine that the pastor's sabbatical is in the best interest of both the pastor and the church.
- 3) **Term:** The duration of the sabbatical leave is flexible depending on needs and objectives. It should be a minimum of three months, up to a maximum of six months. The sabbatical will not effect vacation time.
- 4) **Timing:** The timing of the sabbatical leave shall take into consideration the needs of the congregation, the scheduling needs from the pastor's proposal, and other pertinent concerns as may be established.
- 5) **Activities:** The activities, during sabbatical, will be for the improvement of the physical, emotional, educational and spiritual wellbeing of the Pastor, as well as the congregation. While the sabbatical may include vacation type activities; that should not factor prominently in the plan.
- 6) **Pastor's Remuneration:** The financial support of the pastor during the sabbatical period will include full regular salary, retirement benefits, and health insurance; just as if they were working in their normal capacity. While vacation and sick time will not accrue during the sabbatical, any "banked" time will not be used.
- 7) **Expenses:** It is anticipated that during the sabbatical there may arise expenses directly related to the "education, refreshing and renewing" aspects of the sabbatical. As part of the approved plan for the sabbatical the Church may agree to pay all or part of said expenses.

8) Process:

- a)** The pastor shall submit his/her request for sabbatical leave to the Pastoral Leadership Team at least 6 months in advance.
- b)** The written plan for sabbatical shall be developed by the pastor in consultation with the PLT. Upon approval by the PLT, the plan shall be submitted to the Church Council for approval. If the sabbatical involves the Senior Pastor, the plan shall include a letter approving the plan from the North Pacific District Supervisor.
- c)** The proposal should include the following: types of ministry-related activity planned during the sabbatical; types of educational type activity planned during the sabbatical; other plans for physical rest, personal recreation, family responsibilities, intellectual stimulation, and spiritual renewal; the personal expectations regarding the impact of the activities on the pastor's rest and renewal; strategy for coverage of the pastor's duties during the sabbatical; any request for payment of sabbatical expenses;
- d)** During the sabbatical the pastor shall be responsible to keep in regular contact with a designated "Pastoral Care" person. This person shall be selected by the PLT, after consultation with the pastor. The "PC" person shall monitor the pastors "follow-through" with the approved plan; and provide spiritual, emotional and personal support and encouragement to the pastor. As needed or requested, the person shall communicate with the PLT on the progress/status of the pastor. The "PC" person shall not be an employee of East Hill Church.
- e)** Upon return from sabbatical leave, the pastor shall first meet with the Pastoral Leadership Team before reentering his/her duties of ministry. A date shall be scheduled for this meeting prior to the commencement of the sabbatical leave. The purpose of the meeting shall be twofold. First, the PLT will inform the pastor of all issues that have arisen in his/her absence, bring him/her up to date on all activities, and discuss the effect the sabbatical has had on the church. Second, the pastor will in turn give a brief oral report to the PLT on his/her activities and what he/she feels transpired with regard to carrying out the goals of the sabbatical.
- f)** The pastor will prepare a written report no more than six months after he or she returns. The report will include an evaluation of the sabbatical leave in terms of personal, family, ministerial and congregational impact. It shall also include any suggestions regarding future sabbaticals. The report will be personally presented to the Church Council, after review by the PLT.