

PASTORAL SABBATICAL POLICY

A Guide for Planning and Development

The purpose of the following document is to aid pastors and church leadership in the development of a policy for Sabbatical Leave for their pastors and staff. The following rationale and suggestions are offered to encourage churches to adopt some form of official renewal leave policy, for the health and revitalization of their pastor, his or her family, and the local congregation.

WHY SHOULD A PASTOR RECEIVE A SABBATICAL?

Unhealthy stress and compassion fatigue of pastoral ministry are taking their toll on the lives of the pastor and their families. Many are running on a nearly empty tank; attempting to recapture their physical, spiritual, and emotional vitality that has been lost to the demand and duties of contemporary ministry.

In his book “Support Your Local Pastor”, Wes Roberts quotes from a revealing survey of pastors conducted by the Fuller Institute of Church Growth.

- 1,500 pastors leave the ministry each month due to burnout, conflict, or moral failure.
- 60-80% of Bible College and seminary graduates exit the ministry within the first five years of entering.
- 80% believe that pastoral ministry is affecting their family negatively.
- 33% say that, “Being in ministry is clearly a hazard to my family.”
- 90% feel they were not adequately trained to cope with the ministry demands placed upon them.
- 40% report having serious conflict with a parishioner at least once a month.
- 70% have a lower self-image after they’ve pastored than when they started.
- 71% of pastors stated they were experiencing symptoms of burn out, battle depression beyond fatigue on a weekly and even daily basis
- 70% don’t have any close friends.

There is a ray of light in the midst of these very sobering statistics. As the church is returning to many of its early and often forgotten disciplines of spiritual refreshment; there seems to be a resurgence of congregations setting aside time and funds to allow their ministers extended rest and study – **a sabbatical**.

WHAT IS A SABBATICAL?

Let me start with what a sabbatical is not! A sabbatical is not a vacation or holiday season get away. It is not a break between job or ministry assignment; it is far more intentional and focused. There are three types of sabbaticals currently employed. The first is an **academic sabbatical**, which is a period of time away for more academic endeavors such as research, study, and writing.

The second type of sabbatical is a **corporate sabbatical**. There are an increasing number of businesses that are seeing the value of giving faithful long-term employees a personal refreshment break. Such professional sabbaticals allow for the emotional and physical refueling of their executives, which has been found to be profitable to the individual and company as well.

The third type of sabbatical is a **ministry sabbatical** or “spiritual renewal leave.” The uniqueness of the ministry sabbatical is that its primary purpose is to aid leaders in ceasing their normal activity to rest and reflect. The goal of this type of sabbatical is to restore and refresh the spiritual leaders physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The desired outcome is greater intimacy with God and the renewed spiritual sensitivity to God and towards people. A ministry sabbatical is the ceasing from normal ministry schedule, routine, and demands. The sabbatical tradition comes from the early times when professors and clergy were given one year every seven to become a student or parishioner again. The sabbatical principle is rooted in the Hebrew word **Shabbat**; literally means, “ceased” and “stopped.” A ministry sabbatical is about “stopping,” “**refraining from our work and activity to rest in His.**” *The sabbatical is a time of renewal and recharging. Roberts suggests every sabbatical should include the “8 R’s”: Relax, Recreation (play!), Rest, Renewal, Revival, Rethinking, Refocusing, Return.*

“Support Your Local Pastor” Roberts p.120

“In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength.” But you would not...” Isa. 30:15

“He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still water. He restores my soul...” Psa. 23:2,3a

MAPPING OUT THE JOURNEY

The following are critical elements of sabbatical planning.

- **Intentionality** (Sabbaticals should not be an after thought or response to an emergency or personal crisis.)
 - **Time frame?**
 - How often (Eligibility?)
 - Who qualifies
 - Senior pastor – senior staff?
 - Cumulative time to qualify?
 - How long (Duration?)
 - **Sabbatical focus and planning?**
 - What are the recipients desired outcome from the sabbatical?
 - Sabbatical construction? (Planning Tutorial)
 - Where does the family fit in?
 - Creation and submission of a written plan?
- **Necessary Arrangements**

- **Financial considerations of the pastor**
 - A continuation of full salary and benefits during the sabbatical is advised (car expense allowance?)
 - Would the congregation assist with travel, retreat, or advanced education costs?
 - What about expenses incurred when family participates?

- **Considerations of the church**
 - Added expense for supply preaching/teaching and pastoral assistance and oversight?
 - Council may want to establish a sabbatical line item in their budget? Percentage allotment?
 - Congregation may want to contribute to the sabbatical expenses.

 - Make it a “sabbatical for the congregation.”
 - Need for advanced education and information.
 - Give instruction and get buy-in from the church council and leadership.
 - The sooner you start planning the better. (Eighteen months to a year would be the ideal)
 - Ministry coverage for the sabbatical period.
 - Who will be left in charge/ultimately responsible?
 - Service coordination and coverage?
 - Pastoral care and crisis coverage?
 - Everyday operations coverage?

 - If possible “theme” the sabbatical time and adjust the rhythm of the congregation and its activity.
 - Teaching/sermon series into the sabbatical
 - Share your stories and lessons on your return

DEVELOPING A SABBATICAL POLICY: Options to Consider Doc.

1. Definition of Sabbatical
2. Purpose or Rationale
 - a. Benefits
 - b. Beneficiaries
3. Activities on Sabbatical
4. Eligibility
5. Terms
6. Conditions
7. Duties of Council and Leadership
8. Financial
9. Reporting

FURTHER READING & RESEARCH

“A Sabbatical Primer for Pastors” David C. Alves

“A Sabbatical Primer for Churches” David C. Alves with Marcy Devers Alves