

Sabbaticals

A Discussion Guide for Pastors and Boards



I. PURPOSE

The Discipline of The Wesleyan Church (2012), §724, simply states:

724. Sabbatical for Pastors. Every Wesleyan church is encouraged to provide a sabbatical leave for its pastor(s) at least every seven years of service. A sabbatical shall be for a minimum of four weeks in excess of vacation time with financial provisions as approved by the local board of administration (cf. 723, 746).

As Wesleyans grapple with the reality of the vocation of pastor and the health of the pastor, we acknowledge the need for regular rest, renewal, and retreat from the spiritual and emotional weight of ministry.

Because the concept of a sabbatical is rare outside of the ministry, it is often misunderstood, both by pastors and congregations. **The goal of this document is to stimulate healthy dialogue between pastors who are eligible for a sabbatical leave and their local boards of administration.** While there are cases when pastors need a sabbatical as a result of burnout, our hope is to help local churches prevent burnout and encourage longer tenures of pastoral ministry through mutually beneficial sabbaticals.

II. SABBATICAL DEFINITION

The concept of a pastoral sabbatical comes from Scripture. Just as we are all called to practice a sabbath stop-day weekly, so God's people were to give the land a sabbath rest every seven years.

Genesis and Leviticus speak of 'Sabbath time' in terms of days, years, and land usage. Since the Sabbath is recognized as a distinctive time in creation—as a gift of rest for both renewal and hope—Scripture infers that regular, periodic rejuvenation is vital in all areas of life. The Old Testament writers directed a time period for the soil to remain untilled so that it could replenish itself. Just like the soil, humans need a season to lie fallow for revitalization of the body, mind, and soul.¹

A sabbatical leave is a time for the pastor to shift gears, to intentionally disengage completely from the tasks and pressures of ministry for study, retreat, reflection, and rest so that he/she might return to the pastorate renewed and ready for future ministry at the same local church.

Every sabbatical is different because renewal looks differently for each pastor. And yet, these three common elements tend to fit in the majority of sabbaticals.

1. **Learning.** Learning may take the form of courses from a university, time with a mentor or counselor, visiting other churches and pastors who could inform the pastor's leadership, a personal reading list, or travel to biblical sites.
2. **Rest.** Sabbaticals are inherently for the purpose of rest. Pastors who want to rest need to leave home. Sabbaticals provide not only rest from work, but also rest from the busyness of work so that renewal can take place. Some pastors might choose to find rest at clergy retreat centers, campgrounds, or monasteries. Rest also may include time with family, as many pastors do not live near their extended families.
3. **Renewal.** Pastors hope for spiritual renewal first and foremost, but also renewing relationships with family members or far-away friends, physical renewal, renewal of the call to ministry at their church, and renewal of healthy patterns of living.²

¹ Pastoral Staff Sabbatical Policy. Hayward Wesleyan Church. <http://www.haywardwesleyan.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Sabbatical-Policy.pdf>.

² Bane Sevier, Melissa. "How to Benefit from a Sabbatical." In *The Clergy Journal*. October 2004. pp. 11-13.

Some have listed other practical aspects of the sabbatical as the chance for the pastor to:

- rekindle passion for God,
- refocus priorities,
- reflect on God's call and where He has led them to this point in ministry,
- dream about the future of what could be at their local church,
- assess their habits of self-care and shore up weaknesses in physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual wellbeing,
- grow intellectually through classes, experiences, or reading, and/or
- spend time with family in worship.

In contrast, a sabbatical is not the same thing as an extended vacation. It is not an escape from ministry with the goal of resigning, nor is it a time to pursue other employment options. A sabbatical also is not an entitlement. Instead, it is a gift from the congregation to the pastor with the intent of mutual benefit and God's refreshing.

The sabbatical means that the pastor is relieved of all normal and emergency duties for the duration of the time away. As people who continually give of themselves and who genuinely bear the burdens of the people in their congregations, pastors who receive a sabbatical come back ready for the next chapter in ministry.

III. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Why would our pastor need one?

There are two reasons why a pastor would need a sabbatical. The first is for burnout. At this point, the sabbatical is for recovery. The second reason is for renewal. This type of sabbatical is preventative so that your pastor does not experience burnout. This guide focuses solely on the second type of sabbatical.

Chip Arn, author and professor at Wesley Seminary at Indiana Wesleyan University, cites a study by "the largest Protestant denomination in the country" on the relationship between the length of the pastorate and the growth of the church. They found that approximately 75% of growing churches were being led by pastors who had been there for more than four years, and two-thirds of declining churches were being led by pastors who had been there for less than four years. Arn concludes, "Long-term pastorates do not guarantee that a church will grow. But short-term pastorates essentially guarantee that a church will now grow."³

The sabbatical is not a magic pill that ensures a pastor's long-term health and effectiveness in ministry. But when combined with regular rhythms of rest and self-care, the sabbatical can be a catalyst for the pastor's growth, which bleeds into the church when he/she returns.

Sabbaticals are not normal practice in my profession. Why is it different for pastors?

This is a common question and it makes great sense on one level. The statistics on pastoral stress and burnout are astounding and well-documented. While pastors serve with joy and are called by God to this vocation, they are fully human and deal with a variety of different dynamics than the average layperson.

- 80 percent of pastors say they have insufficient time with their spouse and that ministry has a negative effect on their family.
- 75 percent report they've had a significant stress-related crisis at least once in their ministry.
- 66 percent say their families feel pressure to model the ideal family to their congregations and communities.

³ <http://wesleyconnectonline.com/pastoral-longevity-and-church-growth-charles-arn/>

- 50 percent feel unable to meet the needs of the job.
- 40 percent report a serious conflict with a parishioner once a month.
- 40 percent of pastors have considered leaving the ministry in the past three months.
- 8 top areas of stress for pastors (in no particular order): time, boundaries, isolation, conflict, mobility, life in the parsonage, concern for children and spouse, and family dynamics.⁴

Imagine if the roles were reversed and you were the pastor. In a real sense, the sabbatical is part of living out the law of love, the law of Christ to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. If we would want a chance like this, all the more reason to figure out how to help our pastor receive one.

Doesn't the pastor's vacation time and regular rhythms of weekly Sabbath cover this?

Pastors in the East Michigan District are required to take all of their vacation time annually. If your pastor is not, you should keep him/her accountable for this. Many churches wonder whether or not taking a sabbatical replaces the pastor's allotted vacation days for the church year. It is common practice for churches to grant the normal amount of vacation days and for those days to not be taken to extend the sabbatical period. Some churches even ask that the pastor be in the office for at least one month on either side of the sabbatical. The nature of a pastor's vacation days is that they are often spread out between seeing family, who may live a far distance away, taking a vacation only with one's spouse, and taking family vacations (for those with children at home).

The need for a sabbatical supplements a pastor's personal practice of taking a weekly Sabbath and caring for oneself physically, emotionally and spiritually. Even if your pastor works hard at caring for him/herself already, taking a sabbatical provides the space and time for renewal that one does not get on a weekly day off.

What about salary and benefits while the pastor is gone? Does the church still pay those?

Yes. The pastor's salary, housing allowance, Social Security, pension, and health coverage and any other benefits the church has included in his/her package continue to be paid during the sabbatical. This is common practice and is not a hardship to the church; the wages would be paid if the pastor was present anyway. In addition, it is more difficult for the pastor to feel like the sabbatical is justified and good if he/she is worrying about the financial ramifications of lost paychecks.

Paying the pastor's salary and benefits during this time is like how the church pays its electric bills on a monthly basis and, on top of that, pays for the furnace to be fixed when needed. Both are necessary and good.

How long is appropriate for a sabbatical?

While *The Discipline* gives the minimum as four weeks, some pastors may take up to eight to twelve consecutive weeks. The pastor needs to give consideration for the church's schedule, the ability of the church to fill the pulpit when he/she is gone, and his/her own need for renewal. Four weeks may be enough; it may not. Recognizing that it will take at least two weeks for the pastor to relax from the pressures and pace of ministry, four weeks may be too short a time.

Questions you may ask together in determining the sabbatical length:

1. What does the pastor hope to do on his/her sabbatical, and how much time might that require?
2. How long would you want someone to give you if a sabbatical were an option at your workplace?
3. What does our church calendar look like? Can the church carry the load for special events normally planned during those possible weeks?

⁴ London, Jr., H.B., and Neil Wiseman. (2003). *Pastors at greater risk*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, pp. 20, 148, 172.

What good reasons would our church have to disallow a sabbatical?

There are at least two good reasons for a church to say “No” to a pastor’s request for a sabbatical. The first is lack of planning. It is important for both pastor and church to have mutual agreement as to the sabbatical plan and to communicate with the congregation. Church boards rightly need to make sure that the church will function during the pastor’s absence. Because of the details required in pre-planning, pastors and churches should ideally begin a year or more in advance of the sabbatical date (see Section IV).

Second, the timing doesn’t work. There will never be a “good” time for a pastor to leave, so the pastor and church need to negotiate a time they feel works the best. Just as we would never have children if we waited until we were financially ready for them, so churches might not allow for a sabbatical for reasons of timing. Consider the turn of the church year, Advent and Easter, building projects, and staff turnover times.

IV. SAMPLE ACTION STEPS PRIOR TO A PASTOR’S SABBATICAL

As the board and pastor are determining how the sabbatical will work, here are some steps to take. A good goal might be to have the church board approve the sabbatical no later than 8 months prior to its start. Feel free to edit these for your context.

12 months before the sabbatical. The pastor submits his/her request at least 12 months in advance as part of an LBA agenda. The pastor and church board look at this document as a talking point together.

9-11 months before the sabbatical. The pastor and church board have dialogue as needed with one another and with key members of the congregation with the goal of affirming a sabbatical 9 months prior to its start.

8-9 months before the sabbatical. The pastor provides a written plan of his/her sabbatical to the church board, including: starting and ending dates, focus of the sabbatical, goals for pastor and church during the sabbatical, basic travel plans, a listing of church activities that will be taken care of in his/her absence, and estimated cost of the sabbatical. This plan will have been developed by the pastor and approved by the District Superintendent.

Once the board and pastor have agreed for the pastor to take a sabbatical, here are some steps the church might take to get ready. Once more, edit these for your context.

1. **Hold a congregational meeting.** Give time for both the pastor and vice-chair of the board to speak. Allow for questions, anticipating that many people will have the same questions that board members had.
2. **Have fireside chats.** Maybe the pastor needs to meet with smaller groups of people to help them process what is happening.
3. **Send out a congregational mailing.** Let the pastor and/or board express why the sabbatical is taking place and their trust and hope for what God will do during that time.
4. **Integrate those who are filling the pastor’s roles.** If the church is bringing in another pastor or intern to fill the pulpit or be in the office, have that person arrive onsite and begin working two weeks to a month before the pastor leaves.
5. **Plan a send off.** Have a church picnic and spend time praying for the pastor and his family. Include the people who will be filling in while the pastor is gone.
6. **Insert a ritual into your worship service.** One church gave the pastor a candle to light each Sunday during the sabbatical. They lit a candle in the sanctuary each Sunday as well as a reminder to pray for their pastor.
7. **Instruct the congregation.** Just because the pastor is gone does not mean everyone else takes a break from church too. Give families specific tasks to fill.

V. PLANNING FOR THE PASTOR'S ABSENCE

A valid concern of many churches is, "What will happen to us while the pastor is gone? Will we lose momentum? Will people stop attending? Will giving decrease?" The board and pastor can take steps together to plan for what will happen during his/her absence.

1. **Look at the church calendar.** How many Sundays will the pastor miss? What other special events normally take place during this time? Will the church plan special events or services or emphases that coincide with the pastor's own renewal focus?
2. **Hire/find volunteer office support.**
3. **Hire/find/assign a pastor to be on call for funerals and hospital visits.** This could be a retired minister in the district, a pastor at a local church nearby, or a Wesleyan pastor within driving distance. If a pastor on staff will be responsible for this, clarify that.
4. **Hire/find/assign pulpit supply.**
5. **If your church has staff pastors, clarify what extra expectations they have during the sabbatical.** How often will they preach? If they are expected to carry larger roles, do they get a bonus in pay or not?
6. **Have a point person who keeps track of what happens.** This could be the LBA vice-chair, LBA secretary, or staff pastor. Have this person record major events, salvations, crises, or decisions made while the pastor was gone. It will be easier for the pastor to resume his/her role if this is put together in one place.
7. **Determine a chain of command.** When it comes to ministry decisions, who will make them? What kinds of decisions should be postponed until the pastor's return?

VI. WELCOMING THE PASTOR AFTER THE SABBATICAL

As the church and pastor plan for the sabbatical, it is important not to overlook reentry. How will the church receive back its pastor? How will the church fill the pastor in on its life and ministry, and how will the pastor share his/her experiences with the congregation?

1. **Plan a church picnic or several smaller gatherings.** These can be times for the church and pastor to debrief and share stories. It may take time for the pastor to be able to distill what God did during the sabbatical.
2. **Don't plan on the pastor preaching the first Sunday he/she is back.** Allow the pastor and family a chance to worship with the church and greet people. This Sunday is a great day for a district superintendent or staff pastor to preach.
3. **The pastor submits a written summary of his/her sabbatical to the board.** Within 30-60 days of returning, the pastor gives a detailed description of his/her activities and what kind of benefit the sabbatical had.
4. **Proceed with caution when evaluating.** Because the possible benefits of a sabbatical are more abstract—how do we gauge personal renewal?—boards and pastors should be careful when trying to evaluate. It may take three to six months for the full effects of the sabbatical to be apparent to those involved. This doesn't mean you should not evaluate; rather, know that the results may be harder to pin down than you wish. You may want to wait to fully evaluate until one or two months after the pastor has returned.
5. **Care for other staff who took on extra responsibilities.** If other pastoral staff covered more responsibilities, consider giving them some vacation time soon after the pastor's return.

VII. BUDGETING FOR THE SABBATICAL

Just like it is wise for churches to set aside money for a rainy day when the building needs repairs, so also churches can set aside money annually for the sabbatical. Being proactive when hiring a pastor will ease the financial strain seven years later. One group advises budgeting 1/12 of the pastor's salary for a future sabbatical. For example, if the pastor is paid an average of \$45,000 annually over six years,

the church sets aside \$3750 annually, for a total of \$22,000 for year seven. Even if the church is unable to fully meet this number, figure out what does work.

Some pastors also set aside money they receive in honorariums every time they do a wedding or funeral. A church might hold a special dinner, auction, or special offering in order to assist with funding. The church and pastor need to determine, ultimately how much of the sabbatical, if any, that the church will help fund, and how much the pastor must fund on his/her own.

What if you are just starting out? There is help available. The Lilly Endowment Clergy Renewal Program gives grants. Based in Indiana, it gives up to \$50,000, with up to \$15,000 being used for the church's expenses and \$35,000 for the pastor's. Applications must be received a year in advance. Visit their website at www.cpx.cts.edu/renewal.

VIII. POTENTIAL BENEFITS FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH

This question is especially pertinent for board members. The benefits for the pastor are more obvious. If a sabbatical seems at first glance like the church may suffer, consider some of these potential benefits.

1. ***The church fills the void of ministry.*** One of the blessings of a sabbatical is that it forces churches and pastors to think about how ministry is done when the pastor is gone. While your church may choose to pay for pulpit supply or have a retired minister "on call" for pastoral care, the church gets to see herself in action as the shepherds, as those who are "being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5).
2. ***The church expresses gratitude and high value to the pastor.*** Healthy congregations both give and receive gratitude. Gratitude is one reason why people stay in any relationship. We all want thanks at our place of work and in our homes; we all need to hear that we are valued. Congregations that bless current pastors with opportunities for rest and renewal will also be at the top of the list for future staff.
3. ***The relationship between pastor and church is strengthened.*** Just as "absence makes the heart grow fonder" in a marriage, the same is true when the pastor is gone for an extended time. Church members find out how much they appreciate their pastor.
4. ***As go the leaders, so goes the church.*** This is a basic leadership principle that is true in every aspect of ministry, including how the pastor is able to care for him/herself. When a pastor takes a sabbatical, it sends a message that it's okay for everyone at the church to take a break from serving when they need to.
5. ***The church can experience a renewal parallel to the pastor's.*** For example, if the pastor focuses on the disciplines of prayer and solitude during his/her sabbatical, the church can plan to corporately emphasize these disciplines as well. When the pastor returns, everyone gets to share how God met them across the miles.
6. ***The church is strengthened in its trust of the pastor and God.*** Even in the process of determining whether or not a sabbatical will take place, this trust will be tested. The church can grow in this trust as it believes that God does not need any one man or woman to be present for His church to live and thrive.

IX. POTENTIAL BENEFITS FOR THE PASTOR

It is not only churches that need convincing of the benefits and need for pastoral sabbaticals. Some pastors believe that they are strong enough to handle the stresses of ministry and are proud of having never taken a sabbatical. A sabbatical can provide these life-giving benefits to the pastor.

1. ***The pastor can decompress from the stress of ministry.*** This simply does not happen during most vacation times, but can on a sabbatical.

2. ***The pastor can return to healthy rhythms.*** Rhythms of prayer, exercise, sleep, and time with family get jumbled as Sundays come and go. These habits are redeveloped and then can be integrated into life in the pastorate.
3. ***The pastor can recommit to his/her calling.*** This applies both to a life of ministry and to the specific calling to the local church. Ministers often find that upon return, they are strengthened and ready for the challenges of their unique context. They minister in grace *and* truth.
4. ***The odds of a longer pastorate increase.*** As we saw above, studies show a connection between a healthy church and the tenure of its pastor(s).
5. ***The pastor can renew relationships.*** Pastors with children or teens at home have to figure out the balance between time spent alone and time with family. They can use part of their sabbatical to meet old friends or extended family who live at a distance.
6. ***The pastor is strengthened in his/her trust of the congregation and God.*** Likewise, the pastor cannot leave if he/she is worried about what is happening back home. Knowing that one cannot return and do the work of the ministry forces the pastor to trust God to shepherd His people, and His people to shepherd one another.

X. CONCLUSION

Whether you're reading this as a pastor or board member, please consider not *if* a sabbatical is good and necessary, but *when*. Jesus said that He would build His church. It is His job, not the pastor's nor the board's. And yet, Jesus also gave us the keys to the kingdom and commissioned us as disciple-makers, shepherds, and co-workers in the gospel. He trusts us to take care of one another.

Ultimately, the issue of a sabbatical is one of relationship. We know that it is not common practice in many of our workplaces. We know that there are many good reasons why we would hesitate to grant one—financial, ministry-related, timing, etc. And for many of us, this is new, unknown, and therefore scary territory.

Our prayer is that you, together, would traverse the journey of pastoral renewal and come out healthier on the other side. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all (2 Corinthians 13:14).

XI. APPENDIX 1: WESLEYAN PASTORS WITH RECENT SABBATICAL EXPERIENCE

1. Bart Hall, solo pastor of Central Wesleyan Church, Jackson, MI
2. Joel Heron, senior pastor of Greenville Community Church, Greenville, MI
3. Michael Higley, senior pastor of Riverside Wesleyan Church, Sacramento, CA

XII. APPENDIX 2: RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Articles

Sevier, Melissa Bane. How to Benefit from a Sabbatical. *The Clergy Journal*. October 2004, pp. 11-13.

Books

Bullock, A. Richard and Brusehoff, Richard J. (2000). *Clergy renewal: The Alban guide to sabbatical planning*. The Alban Institute.

Peterson, Eugene. (1989). *The contemplative pastor*. Chapter 13: Desert and harvest: A sabbatical story.

Church Policies

Hayward Wesleyan Church, Hayward, WI. Pastoral Staff Sabbatical Policy. <http://www.haywardwesleyan.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Sabbatical-Policy.pdf>

North Park Wesleyan Church, North Park Wesleyan Church Personnel Policies. http://www.northparkwesleyan.com/files/Personnel_Policy.pdf

Websites

Arn, Chip. "Does Your Church Have a Sabbatical Leave Policy?" <http://wesleyconnectonline.com/does-your-church-have-a-sabbatical-leave-policy-charles-arn/>