

SABBATICAL

Helpful Hints
for a Successful
Sabbatical



DALLAS
THEOLOGICAL
SEMINARY

FROM THE DALLAS SEMINARY ALUMNI OFFICE

Welcome

Running on empty is risky. Yet, we do it. The pressures of “what’s next” propel us forward as the fuel that keeps us going dwindles away. We have no energy reserves for unexpected emergencies and ministry opportunities. Quickly, we find ourselves stalled on the side of the road. When this happens, the time it takes to recover far exceeds the time it would have taken to refill our tanks when we knew they were running low.

The sabbatical is God’s “fuel stop” for His people. The Office of Alumni and Church Relations at Dallas Seminary is committed to the sabbatical concept and stands ready to help you pursue God’s provision for rest. This brochure provides resources to help you plan and implement a successful sabbatical. The following pages address definitions, needs and benefits, planning, implementation, and a sample sabbatical policy. We pray that you will find the information helpful and that God uses it to bless you, your family, and your ministry.

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The Sabbatical: An Overview

A sabbatical is an extended period of leave that organizations give to employees who have served long and well. Universities, for instance, provide sabbaticals for tenured professors, and some corporations offer them as well.

Churches also are beginning to leverage the benefits of sabbaticals for their pastoral staff. Common goals include spiritual and physical renewal, intellectual growth, strengthening relationships, and gaining new perspectives on ministry. How pastors use their sabbatical time will vary depending on their individual needs, personalities, and family responsibilities. Wes Roberts, author of *Support Your Local Pastor*, and others have suggested that an effective sabbatical includes the following elements:¹

- Rest: Observing a Sabbath, a rare practice in achievement-oriented cultures.
- Relationship: Building deeper connections with God, family, and friends.
- Recreation: Taking time to exercise and play.
- Reading, Research, and Writing: Pursuing topics of particular interest.
- Reflection: Reviving the neglected art of meditation.
- Refocusing and Rethinking: Seeking new purpose and vision.
- Return: Bringing all the benefits back into ministry.

Unfortunately, the purpose of sabbaticals is sometimes misunderstood. In *Pastoral Sabbatical Policy: A Handbook for Planning*, Gary Harrison explains the importance of knowing what a sabbatical is not.²

- It is not a vacation. Unlike vacations, “sabbaticals involve a plan, a goal and accountability.” Sabbaticals “should be taken in addition to earned vacation time.”

¹ Wes Roberts, *Support Your Local Pastor: Practical Ways to Encourage Your Minister*, NavPress, 1995.

² Gary Harrison, *Pastoral Sabbatical Policy: A Handbook for Planning*, Pinnacle Ministries, 2004, p. 4.

- It is not academic leave. Theological education is extremely demanding and does not allow for emotional, spiritual, and relational renewal.
- It is not escape. A sabbatical is not a way for pastoral staff to escape a troubled ministry. They must face such troubles and deal with them before true rest is possible. Similarly, a sabbatical should never be viewed as a time to search for a new place of ministry.

The Need

Churches can be slow to recognize the value of sabbaticals. Harrison described the opposition’s argument like this: “Why does the pastor need a sabbatical? I don’t get one, and the business world is plenty tough!” Harrison approached that question from two perspectives—practical and biblical.

“You get to going so fast that pretty soon you don’t hear His voice.”

—National Church Leader

Practical Perspective

Churches are realizing that the stress of ministry can lead to burnout and a rapid rate of turnover. Roberts cites troubling statistics from a study conducted by the Fuller Institute of Church Growth:³

- 90 percent of pastors reported working more than 46 hours per week, and often more than 60.
- 75 percent of pastors reported a significant personal crisis due to stress at least once every five years.
- 40 percent reported having a serious conflict with a church member at least once a month.

Stress often stems from a pastor’s relative lack of control over work environments and schedules, according to Roberts. He pointed out that a lawyer can decline a new client. A doctor can refer a patient to another clinic. An electrician can schedule a repair job for another day. Pastors, even those who schedule carefully, cannot refer members to other churches or postpone responses to members’ emergencies.⁴ This relative inability to control stressors sets the ministry apart from other professions.

³ Roberts, *Support Your Local Pastor*, p. 19.

⁴ Roberts, *Support Your Local Pastor*, p. 18.

Biblical Perspective

Both the Old and New Testaments reveal God’s design for a work-rest cycle. Bob Deffinbaugh (ThM, 1971) explains the Sabbath’s origin in Exodus: *The Birth of the Nation*:

The Sabbath has its roots in Genesis chapter 2, on the seventh day of creation when God rested, after completing His work of creation. The Book of Exodus builds on this foundation, first commanding a Sabbath rest in regard to harvesting the manna in the wilderness (chapter 16), then instituting the Sabbath as the Fourth Commandment, given by God from Mt. Sinai (chapter 20).⁵

Much debate surrounds the question of how the Sabbath applies to New Testament saints. Whatever position you take, however, it remains a fact that Jesus affirmed its value: “The Sabbath was made for man,” He said (Mark 2:27). Once, when the disciples were so busy that they didn’t have time even to eat, Jesus said, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest” (Mark 6:31). As Deffinbaugh concludes, “While the precept of Sabbath-keeping is not in force today, the principles of the Sabbath have much to commend themselves to us in the hectic pace of our world.”⁶

The Benefits

The benefits of sabbaticals extend far beyond the pastoral staff to the congregation and, ultimately, to the world they seek to reach for Christ. The Baptist General Convention of Texas, in its publication *Minister’s Study Leave*, highlighted four key benefits of sabbaticals:⁷

Sabbaticals bring spiritual renewal to the church.

During a sabbatical a church “grows beyond the spirituality of its pastor.” The congregation experiences different gifts of leadership and teaching as other staff and members step up to continue the work.

“We got what we needed—a new Steve Klemz to serve as our pastor.”
—Church member in Utah, commenting on the renewal their pastor received during his sabbatical.

⁵ Bob Deffinbaugh, *Exodus: The Birth of the Nation*, “The Sabbath in Apostolic Preaching and Practice,” www.bible.org, 2004.

⁶ Deffinbaugh, *Exodus*.

⁷ Baptist General Convention of Texas, *Minister’s Study Leave*, brochure, date unknown.

Sabbaticals help extend the pastor's effective ministry.

"When an effective minister enjoys a long tenure, the church is usually a growing, healthy one." Lack of leadership continuity, however, is an obstacle to church effectiveness. Sabbaticals are a key to preventing the burnout that can push pastors to leave.

Sabbaticals strengthen the pastor's family life and thus his or her ministry.

First Timothy 3:4 requires church leaders to manage their own families well. A pastor's seven-day-a-week responsibilities, however, limit his or her family time. A sabbatical temporarily relieves those limitations. This investment in the pastor's family life ultimately makes him or her a better minister.

Sabbaticals broaden the church's vision through exposure to new ideas.

A sabbatical creates "an atmosphere for intellectual growth." During a sabbatical, the pastor has time to meet and study with effective mentors who can inspire and challenge him or her. In addition, the congregation gains exposure to the thoughts and teachings of interim leaders.

The Policy

The best sabbaticals are intentional. They are pre-planned, proactive tools, not afterthoughts or emergency reactions. Harrison suggested that a proactive policy will address the following issues:⁸

Time Frame and Schedule

"I went to my elders, and I told them my wife wanted a sabbatical. The elders are more afraid of her than they are of me; so they took the request seriously."

—Senior Pastor
in Tennessee

A sabbatical schedule will give pastoral staff both "an incentive for staying longer and built-in points of refreshment" when they do. Here are just three of the many options:

- Option A: After three consecutive years of service, a one-month sabbatical. After the next three years, a three-month sabbatical.
- Option B: After every five consecutive years of service, a three-month sabbatical.
- Option C: After seven consecutive years of service, a six-month sabbatical.

⁸ Harrison, Pastoral Sabbatical Policy, p. 5.

Costs

Sabbaticals incur expenses for both the pastor and the church. It is assumed that the pastor will retain a full salary and benefits during the sabbatical. The budget can include an extra amount for necessary sabbatical expenses, such as travel and lodging. The church also should budget for an interim pastor and/or pulpit supply, if such will be hired.

Staff Eligibility

The policy should address which staff positions are eligible. Given the goals of sabbaticals, the focus should be on the most demanding positions—senior pastor, associate pastors, and ministry directors. Common sense suggests that only one pastor should be on sabbatical at a time.

Continuation of Ministry

The work of the church needs to continue in the pastor's absence. This includes preaching/teaching, officiating at weddings and funerals, visitation, and leadership. Planning for interim leadership will ensure that remaining staff are not overworked or asked to make decisions beyond their authority.

Congregational Involvement

The congregation should be involved in approving the church's sabbatical policy, because their support is critical to its success. A positive view of the sabbatical will help them benefit from the experience, accept interim leaders, and assume extra responsibilities in the pastor's absence.

Accountability

A good sabbatical policy includes a framework for accountability. During leave, the pastor should discuss his or her progress regularly with a mentor, perhaps a pastor from another church. Reports to the church board/elders, church staff, and congregation provide other avenues of accountability.

Family Involvement

Since the pastor's entire family feels the impact of his or her work, the policy should ensure family involvement in the sabbatical. Beware of one shortcoming of purely academic sabbaticals: The pastor becomes buried in his or her studies, and the family gets left behind.

Reinvestment

While congregational involvement looks to preparing before the sabbatical, reinvestment speaks of the pastor sharing after the sabbatical. The church

should see the benefits of their investment—whether in the form of new initiatives, fresh vision, or new vitality in the pulpit.

The Implementation

A leader's sabbatical can challenge and benefit everyone involved, given adequate planning. So the most important step is the first: Develop the church's written sabbatical policy well before it's needed.

Policy development can be initiated by the pastoral staff, elders, or members. After doing some research and perhaps interviewing another church with sabbatical experience, the initiators can present a brief proposal to the board/elders. This proposal could include basic definitions and the case for sabbaticals, suggest that a small committee draft a policy for review, and propose a timeline for policy development (deadlines for reviews, congregational approval, etc.). Ideally, the policy would be finalized and approved 6 to 12 months before any staff members become eligible for a sabbatical.

“How can I persuade a person to live by faith and not by works if I have to juggle my schedule constantly to make everything fit into place?”

—Author and Translator

Once the sabbatical policy is part of church personnel policies, eligible staff must keep their eyes on their calendars. Apply for your sabbatical well in advance. This gives the church time to review your proposal, approve

it and include any extra expenses in the coming year's budget.

Finally, pastors must take their sabbaticals. It sounds simple, but it is not easy. As Eugene Peterson wrote in *The Contemplative Pastor*, vanity and laziness can keep pastors too busy to rest. Vanity feeds on the self-importance that comes from always being in demand. Laziness leaves us indolent, letting others who do not understand pastoral work determine our agendas because we lack the self-control to decide for ourselves.⁹

The happy alternative is humble obedience to God's prescription for rest, and the blessings that follow. To paraphrase Chip Ingram (ThM, 1984), deliberate rest protects our bodies from wearing out, our spirits from tuning out, and our souls from burning out.¹⁰

⁹ Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989.

¹⁰ Chip Ingram, *A Word to the Overworked, Overwhelmed and Overcommitted*, Living on the Edge, June 20–21, 2005.

Resources

Internet

* About Sabbaticals, Baptist General Conference of Canada,
www.bgc.ca/NewFiles/SabbaticalGuidelines.pdf

Clergy Sabbaticals: A Brief Guide, Charis Ecumenical Center, Concordia University, www.cord.edu/dept/charis/sabbat_info.html

Investing in a Pastor's Wellness, A. Randy Nabors, in Faith Online, Presbyterian Church in America, www.byfaithonline.com
(search for "pastor's wellness")

National Clergy Renewal Program Grants, Lilly Endowment Inc.,
www.clergyrenewal.org

* Pastoral Sabbatical Policy: A Handbook for Planning,
Gary Harrison, Pinnacle Ministries, www.pinmin.org/resources.htm
(click on "Sabbaticals: Necessary Option")

A Sabbatical for the Pastor, Reformed Church in America,
www.rca.org/leaders/ministry/sabbaticals.html

*Sample Sabbatical Plans, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,
www.elca.org/leadership/sabbatical.html

Sabbatical Grants for Pastoral Leaders Program, Louisville Institute,
www.louisville-institute.org/secondary/pastoralgrants.asp

A Word to the Overworked, Overwhelmed and Overcommitted (radio broadcast June 20–21, 2005), by Chip Ingram (ThM, 1984), Living on the Edge, <http://resources.lote.org/lote/> (scroll down and click "More Messages")

Please Note: Website content and/or addresses are subject to change.
Information listed here is correct as of February 2006.

Books and Videos

Clergy Renewal: The Alban Guide to Sabbatical Planning, A. Richard Bullock and Richard J. Bruesehoff, The Alban Institute, (www.alban.org/BookStore.asp), 2000.

The Contemplative Pastor, Eugene H. Peterson, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989.

Support Your Local Pastor: Practical Ways to Encourage Your Minister, Wes Roberts, NavPress, 1995.

Why You Should Give Your Pastor a Sabbatical (video), Roy M. Oswald, The Alban Institute (www.alban.org/BookStore.asp), 2001.

Sample Sabbatical Policy

Sabbatical policies come in all lengths and formats. The following sample can serve as a template for your church. Additional samples are available on the websites marked with an asterisk (*) on page 7.

Sample Sabbatical Policy for Pastoral Staff at _____ Church

Reason and Purpose

The pastoral sabbatical will give pastoral staff at _____ Church time away from normal responsibilities and routines so that they can pursue a plan of spiritual, intellectual, professional, physical and/or relational renewal. Sabbatical activities may include study, travel, relaxation, writing and/or recreation. The pastoral sabbatical is not just a reward for longevity of service, and it is not part of standard vacation time. A pastoral sabbatical is an opportunity for pastoral staff to follow a deliberate plan of renewal so that they may continue in effective service to the Lord in this congregation.

Applying for Sabbatical

An eligible pastor may submit a written sabbatical proposal through the church's regular chain of command. After approval by the senior pastor, the proposal should be submitted to the Board of Elders/Deacons for final consideration at least __ months before the sabbatical's proposed start date. The proposal should include goals, a plan for achieving those goals (including accountability and family involvement), dates of the sabbatical, and suggestions for the continuation of the pastor's responsibilities during his or her leave.

Eligibility

A pastoral sabbatical is a privilege, not a right, and is not granted automatically because of employment or length of service. If a staff member leaves his or her position before taking the sabbatical, he or she will not be compensated for the unused sabbatical.

The sabbatical would be made available to full-time pastoral staff: senior pastor, associate and assistant pastors, and directors of the _____ ministries. Eligibility begins after __ years of continuous service and is limited to those who anticipate at least __ additional year(s) of service after their sabbaticals. At the end of a sabbatical, the year count is reset to zero. Subsequent sabbaticals would be made available after each __ years of continuous service. Only __ pastoral staff

member(s) may be on sabbatical at the same time, and only __ staff may take a sabbatical in the same year. The Board of Elders/Deacons will prioritize requests based on length of service and scheduling considerations.

Time Frame and Schedule

The maximum length of a sabbatical will be __ weeks. In most cases, the sabbatical time would be utilized as a whole, meaning that sabbatical weeks cannot be used sporadically to extend regular vacation time. In applying for sabbaticals, pastors should propose dates that are considerate of the schedules of their coworkers and congregations.

Funding

In addition to full salary and benefits, the pastor is eligible for the reimbursement of expenses that apply directly to sabbatical goals, (i.e. travel, lodging, tuition). Reimbursements will not exceed \$_____ per sabbatical. The church also will pay for any extra expenses associated with covering the responsibilities of the pastor during his or her leave (i.e. pulpit supply fees).

Policy Review and Maintenance

The Board of Elders/Deacons is responsible for reviewing and maintaining this policy.



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