

“The Pastor’s Sabbatical – A PSEC Resource”
Adopted June 15, 2016 by the Church and Ministry Council
Pennsylvania South East Conference / United Church of Christ

INTRODUCTION

The term sabbatical has its roots in the Hebrew cultural-religious concept of Sabbath, or rest, after seven days or years. Genesis 2:1-3 notes that God rested from the work of creation after seven days. The versions of the Ten Commandments describe the Sabbath as a day of reflection on the blessings of God for creation (Exodus 20:8-11).

Deuteronomy 15 describes a cyclical fiftieth year jubilee (the year following seven times seven years) was celebrated. During the Jubilee, land was returned to its ancestral owners and slaves were freed from bondage. Sabbatical was a time for rest, renewal, and recovery.

WHY A SABBATICAL LEAVE?

Sabbath rest has become a lost concept in modern life. Current technology and multi-tasking have inhibited the ability to balance periods of work and rest. Many faithful people feel that they must work ever longer and harder. They expect the same thing of their pastor. This is contrary not only to the wisdom of biblical teachings but to all we know about learning, productivity and creativity. For pastors, it creates an expectation that they will ignore Sabbath rest which they are called by the scriptures to proclaim for the community, practice for themselves and model for others.

The financial pressures experienced by many congregations are increasingly being carried by reductions to clergy support—including the allowance for Sabbatical Leave; this at a time when clergy burnout happens at an alarming rate. There are at least three additional factors unique to ministry that make Sabbatical time imperative for clergy and congregations alike:

1. A pastor has emotional highs and lows unlike most other vocations. In the course of a day, a pastor can deal with death, deep spiritual issues, great encouragement, petty criticisms, tragedies, illnesses and celebrations of birth. The emotional roller coaster is draining.
2. A pastor is on 24-hour call. Most pastors don’t have an “off” switch. They go to sleep with the knowledge they could be awakened by a phone call at any time of the day. Vacations are rarely uninterrupted.
3. No profession requires the array of skills necessary to be an effective pastor which include, but are not limited to: how to manage group processes; conflict resolution; facilities management; community organizing; fund raising; staff and parish administration; supervising, coaching, supporting, and evaluating staff members; public speaking; pastoral counseling. Pastors must keep pace with a constantly changing

religious landscape and implement new ideas and strategies for evangelism and church growth during a time of intense decline in national church attendance, all the while maintaining their own physical and emotional health and being attentive to their families.

In the context of ministry, Sabbatical time is for spiritual renewal and growth. It is therefore, personal and individual in nature. Most Sabbatical leaves include study, spiritual retreat and rest.

Penn Southeast Conference has a tradition of encouraging a three-month Sabbatical period after six years of ministry. This stipulation is included in the PSEC Standard Call Agreement. Regardless of the duration, it is vital the leave be taken as a continuous, uninterrupted block of time.

Benefits to the Congregation

Some congregations are so clergy-centered that nothing happens without the pastor. An effective congregation exhibits a good balance between pastoral and lay leadership. The longer a pastor stays in the congregation, the more responsibility he/she will accumulate, and the more the congregation will take him/her for granted. Granting a sabbatical leave to a pastor becomes a great way for parishioners to once again claim certain roles within the congregation that correspond with the gifts they have been given by God. When the pastor returns from the sabbatical, the congregation will have a much better understanding of their own ministry and the ways in which they take their pastor for granted.

Funding A Sabbatical/Renewal Leave

Congregational leaders and ministers often assume that they cannot afford a Sabbatical. These concerns should not be roadblocks to discussing a Leave. During the sabbatical, the congregation continues to provide salary, housing, Pension Plan dues and health care premiums for its minister. It is best to plan ahead. If a congregation offered its minister a Sabbatical in six years and began setting aside just \$100.00 per month, in five years the congregation would have \$7,200.00 plus interest to fund many of the costs associated with the minister's leave.

Staffing During Such A Sabbatical Leave

Both the congregation and minister may be concerned about fulfilling pastoral needs during the leave. Who will staff the church? Preach and lead worship on Sunday mornings? Celebrate weddings and funerals? Make hospital visits? Make church growth calls?

As a spiritual leader of the congregation, an elder or deacon might relish the opportunity to use his/her gifts and graces for ministry. A retired minister might be delighted to serve the congregation in the minister's absence, knowing that this service would be for a short period of time. Some may even see such special service as a calling within their call.

Other options would be to hire a seminary intern or graduate or a licensed minister. Some are still awaiting a call after completing seminary or licensed ministry training. The congregation could offer the newly trained minister an opportunity to gain additional experience.

The Pennsylvania Southeast Conference or National Staff may be able to commit to preach during the minister's leave. This would give the congregation and representatives of the wider church an opportunity to get to know each other better.

WHAT HAS TO BE DONE FOR A SUCCESSFUL SABBATICAL LEAVE?

Congregations expect much of their ministers and ministers expect much of themselves. In healthy relationships between congregations and their ministers, there is a sense of mutual care. The minister cares for the members of the congregation and they also care for the minister.

THE LOCAL CHURCH AND PASTOR CARE FOR EACH OTHER BY DOING THE FOLLOWING:

The terms of sabbatical leave are clarified when a call agreement is negotiated. The standard PSEC call agreement form allows for:

- Three months of Sabbatical after six full years of ministry at the current ministry setting.
- Financial support in addition to salary and usual benefits.
- The length of time following sabbatical leave that a pastor is expected to remain as pastor (usually one year unless negotiated differently).

Other considerations should include:

- Determination as to whether sabbatical leave can be taken with vacation, or if one must not follow the other directly.
- Clarity about what happens if the pastor does not stay for the minimum number of years to accrue a sabbatical leave or chooses not to take one.
- Policy on how the content of the sabbatical leave is determined. While the pastor is the primary determiner of what to do during a sabbatical leave, the Personnel Committee, Pastoral Relations Committee, the Governing Board / Consistory can be designated to work with the pastor to make plans or approve them.

(see Appendix A for a sample Sabbatical agreement)

THE LOCAL CHURCH CARES FOR THE PASTOR BY:

- Understanding the importance of the sabbatical leave and treat it as an earned benefit not an unearned gift.

- Understanding AND PLANNING FOR the additional cost a pastor can incur when participating in a sabbatical.
- Planning for the sabbatical leave by setting aside an amount each year, via a budget line item, to cover the additional costs of pastoral leadership during the regular Pastor's sabbatical and to provide funds for the Pastor. The pastor may use these funds for the cost of a sabbatical. *These funds are in addition to continuing education funds.*
- Maintaining the pastor's full pay and benefits while she or he is away.
- Assuming additional administrative and program duties in the pastor's absence.
- Arranging for an interim pastor or a pastoral coverage during the time the pastor is away.

THE PASTOR CARES FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH BY:

- Recognizing that a sabbatical leave is not available to many caring leaders and show appreciation for the renewal the leave provides.
- Talking about sabbatical plans 18 months prior to the anticipated starting date of the leave, with family, church members, and people in the Wider Church.
- Exploring options for sabbatical projects and locations. Form and discuss, with an appointed Sabbatical planning group, the goals and objectives for the proposed sabbatical. This group will help identify the needs of both you AND the church.
- Presenting a Sabbatical plan, in writing, for acceptance by the church governing body 12 months prior to the start of the Sabbatical period.
- Communicating FREQUENTLY with the congregation which is critical before, during and after planning. *(see Appendix B for Sample Letter to the congregation).*
- Building up personal savings overtime to pay for cost of travel or study.
- Preparing to answer questions about the advantages and disadvantages of sabbaticals with members of the church.

WHEN THE SABBITICAL IS OVER:

Leave-taking and return are significant moments, appropriately marked in worship. In the worship service immediately preceding the sabbatical, acknowledge the excitement, anticipation, as well as anxiety, in prayer, litany and exchange of symbols. On the minister's

return, the congregation will want to find ways to say, “Welcome back!” In the worship service through prayer, litany and exchange of gifts, acknowledge the minister’s absence and return as well as changes that have taken place in the congregation. Congregations that celebrate both the beginning of the Sabbatical as well as their minister’s return discover new capacities for success, transformation and joy.

RESOURCES

Bullock, Richard and Bruesehoff, Richard J. Clergy Renewal: The Alban Guide to Clergy Sabbatical Planning. The Alban Institute, 2000.

Oswald, Roy M. and Kroeger, Otto. Sabbatical Planning for Clergy and Congregations. The Alban Institute, 1988. Out of print but available through Amazon.com.

“Sabbatical / Renewal Leave for Pastors in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ): Suggested Guidelines.” 2005. A Document of *The General Commission on Ministry* distributed by Office of Search and Call, Disciples Home Missions, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

APPENDIX A

Sample Sabbatical Leave Policy

Sample Church, United Church of Christ affirms that extended continuing education opportunities are beneficial to both the minister and congregation. Such opportunities are intended to enhance skills, increase competence and expand horizons of the minister for his or her ministry with the congregation. Sabbaticals provide prime opportunities for renewal of spirit, extended study, reflections and planning and creative growth that normal routines do not allow and are provided for by our congregation according to the following guidelines:

1. Members of the full-time ministerial staff shall be eligible for a three-month sabbatical leave after completing six years of employment. After a sabbatical has been completed, the minister shall be eligible for a sabbatical again in five years.
2. Such leaves are intended for the mutual benefit and growth of both the minister and the congregation. The timing for the sabbatical leave is a concern and must be compatible with the congregation's present needs and programming. Therefore, the time of the sabbatical leave and its funding must be approved by the Church Council.
3. The minister should begin the request process in the year before the intended sabbatical and complete the process at least six months before the desired sabbatical's beginning. A formal written proposal should be developed and include expectations, focus of the sabbatical, presumed benefits for and impact upon one's work in the ministry, and detailing of the work being left behind. The contents of the proposal should be considered negotiable with the Church Council.
4. Sabbaticals shall not be considered a use of the minister's vacation time. Earned vacation time would not be ordinarily used to extend the period of absence beyond three months.
5. Financial support of the minister by the congregation during a sabbatical leave will continue full salary and housing allowance, retirement benefits, books and journals and insurance.
6. During the sabbatical year, no other continuing education time will be provided. In addition, the minister is entitled to a proportionate share of the budgeted travel allowance for the year.
7. The President of the Church Council will appoint a special task force of at least three people to be known as the Sabbatical Committee. This committee's basic responsibilities will be to manage and coordinate congregational work being left behind by the minister and to assure quality care of the congregation during the minister's leave. The committee will meet with the minister prior to the sabbatical to develop an understanding of and plans

to accomplish those tasks. Immediately after the sabbatical, the committee will bring the minister up-to-date on the congregation's life and programs.

8. The hiring of any individuals to serve as replacement for staff on a sabbatical leave will be negotiated by the Sabbatical Committee and be approved by Church Council.
9. In order for the congregation to benefit from the personal and professional renewal of its ministerial leadership after a paid sabbatical leave of absence, the minister shall remain in the employment of the congregation for at least one year following the minister's return from the sabbatical.
10. No two members of the staff may be on sabbatical leave within nine months of each other.
11. Evaluations of the sabbatical leave and its impact on the minister and the congregation are helpful means for planning such future opportunities. Evaluative reports should be submitted to the Council and shared with the congregation by both the Sabbatical Committee and the minister within thirty days after the leave is completed. The reports should include the benefits and disappointments for both the minister and the congregation, as well as any recommendations for the future.

Congregation President, Sample Church UCC

Chair, Sabbatical Committee, Sample Church UCC

Pastor, Sample Church UCC

APPENDIX B

Sample Sabbatical Communication from the Pastor to the Congregation

Dear Sample Church Members,

Some things you should know about a Sabbatical. First, it isn't a vacation. It is an extended, intentional Sabbath; during that time the pastor is completely relieved of his or her duties, both routine and emergency, and is encouraged to focus solely on personal rest, spiritual rejuvenation, and professional growth. Second, it is paid for through annual contributions to the Sabbatical Fund. We have the money.

According to statistics from Barna Research, Focus on the Family, and Fuller Seminary, almost 1500 pastors leave their ministry positions each month due to spiritual burnout, moral failures, or issues within the church. 80% of pastors feel discouraged in their roles. 50% of pastors say they would leave the ministry if they could, but have no other way of making a living. 80% of seminary and Bible school graduates leave the ministry within the first 5 years. 70% of pastors constantly fight depression. Only 1 out of 10 pastors retire as a pastor.

I'm not sharing those statistics with you to whine or complain about how tough it is to be a pastor. I can't imagine doing anything else with my life, and your encouragement and support make it a blessing to serve as your pastor. However, it's still important to me that churches proactively care for our pastors to ensure personal, spiritual, and emotional health so that they can lead and shepherd in a way that honors God and helps you.

The Church Council and I have worked for many months on my Sabbatical plan and I have shared that plan with the congregation in Sunday morning announcements, the newsletter, via emails, the church web site and with this letter. I'll report on what actually happens when I return. In the meantime, I ask you to consider what you might do to keep a Sabbath time over the summer. Also, you can pray for me during this time.

Pray that this time will be refreshing and invigorating: My prayer is that I would come back after this sabbatical spiritually rejuvenated, having received from God fresh insight and vision for the future of our church. Pray that my time will give me new learning, insight, and perspective.

Pray that I can rest: I pray that I not only benefit from my sabbatical time, but my family would benefit from this as well. Pray that I can make the best use of my time that would include increasing time with my family.

Finally, pray for Pastor _____ who will serve in my absence and all those who continue to lead our congregation. Offer your constructive help. Strengthen them in ministry. As St. Paul wrote: "Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing." (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Blessings to you,

(Pastor's Name)

Source:

Rev. Dr. Jon Fogel

St Johns, Haines, UCC

Wernersville, PA

April 2016

Used with permission

