

Sabbatical Guidelines and Resources

For Congregations of the Kansas District

Adapted from the Southeastern District

Prologue

The word "sabbatical" is derived from "Sabbath." Historically, in church and academia, the professionals were given a Sabbath (sabbatical) every seventh year. The observation was that academic professors and clergy were so worn out after six years of teaching and leading that they needed a year of rest, recovery, renewal, and re-education for their field of endeavor. The assumptions were that it paid off for the professional person (avoiding breakdown) and that it paid off for the institution (re-energized and updated leadership). It is based on Genesis 2:1-4a, in which God modeled and later required (Exodus 17: 8-11) the setting aside of 1/7th of our time for restoration.

"Ministers desperately need to recreate and restore what has been worn down by day-to-day encounters with reality. Nourishing one's soul and regaining perspective requires a change of pace and place—a pilgrimage. Jesus provides us a good example to follow. He was always moving toward His Father—in prayer, in His teaching, in His travel. And the apostles who walked with Him were renewed day by day. That's what sabbatical is about—a pilgrimage with Jesus toward our Heavenly Father. Journeying with Jesus we come to know that there is more to life than suffering or hopelessness. We are moving toward the climax and glory of what it so come. Like the early apostles, we can be recharged by walking with Jesus during an extended time of reflection, spiritual encounter, and community.

"Sabbatical typically includes time for travel, rest, prayer, and experiencing different cultures. The best sabbaticals usually are more open-ended than rigid, allowing for the surprises, and possible new direction, that may come. Jesus' forty days in the wilderness marked a turning point in His ministry. Moses' time spent tending sheep helped change his perspective on life. David tended sheep and learned valuable lessons about God's care and provision. Paul, struck down on the road to Damascus, disappeared into the desert of Arabia for three years and emerged with a new vision. Sabbatical is a time to receive, to be nurtured, to reflect on your relationship with God and your own story, so that you can be renewed, refreshed, and revitalized by the breath of God."

(Revised from Sabbatical Planning for Clergy and Congregations. Richard Bulluck, Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute, 1975.)

Sabbath may be viewed as multi-dimensional, which may be diagrammed as concentric circles beginning at the center with daily "sabbath time" (15-30 minutes), weekly (2 days), monthly (24-hour retreat), annually, and sabbatical time after 5-7 years of service (3 months).

I. Values and Assumptions

A. Giving support to professional workers in maintaining good health benefits the worker, the worker's family, the congregation, and the church at large.

B. Healthy professional workers build healthy congregations and schools.

C. When there is a good match between the professional worker and a congregation, a long-term ministry is desirable. In such instances a sabbatical is cost effective (cf. New Vision for the Long Pastorate, Oswald, Hinand, Hobgood, & Lloyd. Alban Institute, 1990).

D. Good self-care, which includes a regularly scheduled sabbatical, keeps professional workers healthy. It can enable them to achieve a new sense of vision, renew their calling, and evaluate their gifts and skills and the needs of the ministry.

E. The sabbatical time can create new opportunities for members to grow in service and be a blessing for the congregation.

F. Sabbatical leave should be an ongoing *intentional* part of a congregation's ministry, not a reaction to a crisis (i.e., burnout).

G. A professional worker that practices good self-care, remains healthier and may extend his or her ministry.

H. Sabbaticals are a way that congregations can minister to their professional workers.

I. Every congregation / school has its own unique challenges and resources and therefore needs to develop its own sabbatical "policy."

II. Recommendations and Guidelines for Developing a Sabbatical Policy

A. Determine the Time Parameters

1. When?

Timing is crucial to minimize disruption to the congregation. Plan long in advance to prepare the congregation for a smooth transition. The professional worker and congregation will need about a year to plan the sabbatical.

2. How long?

The Kansas District recommends 3 months + vacation time (not in place of) every 5-7 years.

Clarify and distinguish *vacation* and *sabbatical*. (A sabbatical is not simply a "reward" or vacation but an important part of the working relationship between a worker and the congregation.)

Ask: Can the sabbatical purpose and goals be achieved in the time available?

B. Determine Financial Arrangements

1. A continuation of full salary and benefits during sabbatical (except car allowance) is advisable.

2. How will this be financed? Some options might include:

- Entirely financed by the congregation where this is possible. This could be provided for in the annual budget or through special gifts.
- The congregation and professional worker each contributing 3% of salary and housing to a sabbatical year. After seven years, the professional worker would be able to take a leave of three months plus vacation with pay. The funds accrued, plus interest, would be paid to the professional worker over the period of the sabbatical.

- Retired professional workers, or area professionals, may be willing to volunteer their services to make it possible for congregations with limited resources to provide a sabbatical.
- Alternate financing may be available (e.g., from Lutheran organizations or granting agencies), depending on the nature of the sabbatical.

3. What about *additional* costs (e.g., supply preaching, pastoral assistance)?

4. Would the congregation assist with *tuition costs*, where feasible?

C. Make Specific Sabbatical Plans

1. Design

Sabbaticals are very individual. There is no right or wrong plan. There needs to be a mutual agreement by the worker and the congregation on the sabbatical plan. It is useful to have a "mentor" (one who has done it) help develop the plan. Will the sabbatical be programmed or open-ended? For the purposes of spiritual growth? Theological reflection? Creative expression? Pastoral concerns? Justice issues? Travel?

Options might include:

- Encounters with other cultures and with Christian communities in other countries, especially less developed ones (e.g., mission trip).
- Research or writing on independent projects or as part of a formal seminar or academic program.
- Directed reflection on personal and spiritual issues.
- Recreation and rest.

2. Purpose

Is it for rest, spiritual renewal, new experiences and relationships, intellectual growth, decision making time, travel, family time, etc.?

What does the professional worker want (dream, hope) to happen as a result of the sabbatical? How would he/she like the congregation and his/her family to benefit?

A sabbatical is a time to NOT DO what you normally do. (E.g., Do not preach, teach, do normal preparation for ministry, "set foot on the church property," etc.)

3. Physical setting

This could be a retreat center, foreign travel, home, university, etc.

Boundaries are important and need to be established in writing and agreed upon (e.g., expecting a complete absence from the congregation, even when the worker is in town).

4. Other considerations

The congregation may want to appoint a Sabbatical Committee (five members, which may include the president and elder chairman and Care Committee members) to assist both the professional worker and congregation in planning the sabbatical.

Recognize that it will take at least two years of education to help the congregation understand the value of the sabbatical the first time they offer it. Don't rush this. Gain the congregation's ownership and support.

Clarify sabbatical *benefits* to professional worker and congregation. A good sabbatical meets a mutual need. What does the worker want from the sabbatical? How would he/she like the congregation to benefit? What can be special for spouse, children, and friends?

What is the congregation's plan for covering the worker's duties during the sabbatical? What responsibilities need to continue and how will they be addressed?

Are there any restrictions being placed on the professional worker following the sabbatical? (E.g., Must remain for at least one year following sabbatical.)

5. Following the Sabbatical

A "*Reentry Plan*" is crucial. Expect some anger from members and staff, as well as feeling disconnected and out of touch. Both the worker and congregation are in a different place following the sabbatical. It is helpful to renegotiate roles and expectations as part of the reentry process. (This could be an important function of the Congregational Care Committee.)

Submit a *report* to the congregation. This is a time for debriefing and reconnecting.

IV. Resources

Congregations and workers considering a sabbatical (or a sabbatical policy) are invited to contact the Kansas District Church Worker Care Committee. Please visit the Church Worker Wellness page on the Kansas District website for more information. You may also direct questions to the Office of the District President.

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