



SIBURT INSTITUTE

for Church Ministry

Guide to Minister Sabbaticals

Developing a Rationale

Ministers are leaving the pastorate at alarming rates. Additionally, many ministers lack mentoring, pastoral care, and rhythms of rest. In an effort to develop ministers for long-term service to both the congregation they serve and the Kingdom of God, sabbaticals offer an extended period of time to step away from the day-to-day responsibilities of ministry. This time away allows a minister to focus on their spiritual development to gain a renewed energy for ministry. A sabbatical can take a number of forms and there is no set model, however the foundation is to have the minister disengage from the rhythms of ministerial life in order to participate in renewing activities and ultimately re-engage with the congregation's life and future.

The time spent on sabbatical for a minister is not to produce a certain product but to regain focus and energy through their intentional connection with spiritual resources. This connection is a means to renew the minister for the sake of their congregation and the Kingdom. A sabbatical aims to honor ministry by embracing rest and in doing so, demonstrating confidence in the energy God provides to revitalize ministers and their congregations. The sabbatical leave of a minister is best engaged with careful planning and communication. A sabbatical is successful when it strengthens the shared ministry of a minister and congregation to pursue a Kingdom calling with more passion.¹

Examples of a Rationale

- A. To maintain the effectiveness of (church) ministerial staff, ministers are eligible to request a sabbatical after achieving (number) years of continuous service. The leave may be used for study, enrichment, vision-casting, travel, rest, prayer or reflection. The purpose is to renew and invigorate the individual mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and physically and prepare the minister for new heights of service. Due to the nature of servant ministry, adequate time for many of the above-mentioned activities is limited and often overlooked, and (church) in a gesture of appreciation and in the best interest of the individual wants to provide an extended time period for renewal.
- B. The (church) recognizes sabbaticals as important and appropriate for ministerial staff who have served a long term of service, both for physical and mental refreshment and for equipping them for greater service. We have determined that

¹ Robert C. Saler, *Planning Sabbaticals: A Guide for Congregations and Their Pastors* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2019), 4-9.

a ministerial staff member having served at least (number) years at (church) may apply for a sabbatical leave.

Constructing a Principled Framework for Sabbaticals

A framework for sabbaticals provides the minister time to step away from the rhythms of their ministry to gain a renewed vision and hope for their ministerial future while nourishing their soul and body. The opportunity for a minister to participate in a sabbatical simultaneously provides ministry to their congregation. Both in providing an opportunity for lay leaders to serve the church in fuller ways and to serve to the minister on sabbatical in order for the congregation to move forward into the next chapter God is calling them to toward.

A foundational framework will be the importance of a written plan for the sabbatical that includes both a significant contemplative exercise (to disconnect and attend to God's presence) and a significant engagement (learning about something that will support or sustain the next chapter of the minister's professional life). A sabbatical should benefit the minister and congregation. Therefore, a sabbatical should plan for some learning activity which prepares the minister for the next chapter in the minister's life and/or the church's life. This may include opportunities such as taking a course, visiting other churches, travel, reading a prescribed set of books, or engaging in discussion with experts in a particular area.

Terms to consider for Sabbaticals

There are various stages to the sabbatical process: initial dreaming, logistical planning and approvals, the sabbatical leave, the congregation's continued life, the reunion, and the future of shared ministry together. The following terms are meant to be a guide for ensuring your church will utilize sabbaticals for the benefit of both the minister and the congregation as outlined in below.

1. Sabbatical leave will be granted for education, planning, and renewal. It should have a combination of the following purposes:
 - a. to permit opportunity for concentrated research not possible while pursuing normal ministerial duties
 - b. to pursue studies that will strengthen and benefit the congregation
 - c. to provide opportunity for development of professional skills
 - d. to provide opportunity for personal renewal
 - e. to provide extended time for long-term planning and high-level visioning
2. After meeting the number of years required by the sabbatical policy, the staff member will complete an application in writing to their direct supervisor at least (number) months prior to their leave which includes the following:
 - a. the desire for a renewal leave
 - b. a tentative schedule of how the renewal time shall be spent
 - c. an estimate and proposal for any additional funds needed
 - d. a small group of persons who will assist the staff person in planning their experience
 - e. the anticipated benefits of a sabbatical
3. The sabbatical leave is not automatically granted and requests for leave will be considered on a case-by-case basis. (Leadership) after reviewing and approving the plan, will grant the sabbatical up to the maximum leave outlined in these guidelines and any stipends.

- a. The (leadership) is responsible for granting sabbatical leave.
 - b. Churches may create a sabbatical committee to oversee the logistics of implementing the sabbatical policy.
 - i. For a larger church this may be specified senior staff alongside several elders. For a smaller church this may be a small group of leadership and or governance.
 - ii. The tasks of a committee will include approving applications, receiving requests from the staff member, determining stipends, receiving the report concluded by a staff person's sabbatical, etc.
 - c. Typically, no more than one ministry leader should be away on sabbatical leave time simultaneously.
4. The sabbatical leave shall be granted for up to (number) consecutive weeks following (number) years of continuous ministry to our church. *Churches vary in length and frequency of sabbaticals. The Siburt Institute would recommend a minimum of six weeks to a maximum of three months. The frequency could be anywhere from four to seven years of ministry. The longer you are away on sabbatical, the slower the frequency or the slower the frequency the greater period of time granted for a sabbatical.
- a. Ministry staff members who work 40 hours a week are entitled to the full (number) weeks.
 - b. Those who work fewer than forty hours a week may apply for a proportional leave time. Hours per week worked in the staff member's (number) year of employment will be the basis for calculation of the length of the leave. However, in order to maintain flexibility and provide for unique opportunities which may arise, these terms may be adjusted at the discretion of (leadership).
 - c. While on sabbatical leave, the staff member shall receive full salary and benefits.
 - i. During the year in which the sabbatical leave is taken, the staff member shall still have access to normal, accrued vacation time per the (policy). However, under normal circumstances, vacation time should not be appended to the beginning or end of the sabbatical leave.
 - d. Leadership may also require various preparations to be completed by the staff person prior to beginning their sabbatical.
 - i. Reading materials - see the included resource list of book options.
 - ii. Informal planning
 - 1. Discuss with the Sabbatical Team and other staff/volunteers most related to the ministry. Ensure communication with those most affected by the time away, and have the timeframe of the sabbatical on the calendars of those required. Staff and appropriate individuals must have a plan for the continuation of ministry and job responsibilities.
 - a. Optional: Staff members should not check their work email or be available for general contact during the sabbatical. One person on staff may be designated as the only one who can contact the staff member on sabbatical for work-related matters, and then, only in rare cases.
 - iii. Formal planning

1. A small group of persons should be formed by the minister in conjunction with their direct report to help plan the experience.
 - a. Options: one elder, one additional staff member, two church members (likely those who serve in your ministry)
2. The staff person is responsible for making arrangements (sabbatical plan) according to the proposal (e.g., travel, study registration, etc.).
5. Upon completion of the renewal leave within (number) of days, the staff person shall, report in full to (leadership), specifying how the time was actually used and the benefits that were realized.
6. Optional: A sabbatical leave stipend may be given to the minister taking leave. This stipend is not automatically granted, but will be considered by (leadership) based on how the stipend will help accomplish the goals of the sabbatical. The stipend will be paid at the same time wages are paid unless prior arrangements are agreed upon.
7. Optional: This process may be repeated after each (number) years of employment, with an additional (number) weeks added.
8. Upon implementation of a sabbatical policy, a church staff may have multiple ministers eligible for a sabbatical. Therefore, if your church will have one or more staff members immediately eligible for a sabbatical, consider making a plan based on tenure to give those staff members a sabbatical within the first two years.

Communication and Reachability

- It is encouraged that staff do not check their work email or be available for contact during their sabbatical.
 - Consider another congregation to worship with during the sabbatical.
 - Designate a person on staff who will be the only one to contact the sabbatical staff person in rare circumstances deemed necessary by the leadership team.
 - Arrange to have email handled by someone else in addition to having an out-of-office message on.

Intentional Exit and Reentry

- The last first and last few weeks along with the staff person's first few days back in the office are important. It is encouraged to plan those times intentionally.
 - The first few weeks will likely involve coming down off a pattern of "always on."
 - The final week of sabbatical will likely begin a mental re engagement with work.
 - To begin the first few days back at work, there is encouragement to share about the sabbatical experience. Consider time for extended conversations in addition to catching up on tasks.

Processing

- Upon returning from sabbatical, begin to process the experience to share with the leadership team and sabbatical committee.
- Suggested questions to consider:
 - What did you do?
 - What were the highs and lows?

- How did it shape/affect your relationship with the church?
- How did it shape/affect your relationship with God?
- What did you learn?
- How did it compare with your expectations?
- How might your learning and experiences shape or inform your ministry?
- Do you want to make any changes to the way you carry out your work week?
- What do you need from us to help your transition?

Sabbatical Application Suggestions

- Purposes
 - How will your sabbatical bless the following areas?
 - Personal
 - Family
 - Work/Church
- Scheduling and Funding
 - Start/end dates
 - Overall schedule (trips, retreats, etc.)
 - Additional funding needed?
- Coverage of Duties and Communication
 - Who is handling my different duties?
 - Plan for work email and texts?
 - Who is the one person from leadership who can contact me?
- People in the loop
 - Who is on my sabbatical committee?
 - Elders
 - Ministry Staff
 - Members
 - Have the proper people signed off?
 - Staff leader
 - Elder leader

Resources

Alves, David C. *A Sabbatical Primer for Pastors: How to Initiate and Navigate a Spiritual Renewal Leave*. Self-published, 2014.

Barton, Ruth Haley. *Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest: From Sabbath to Sabbatical and Back Again*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022.

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