

GUIDELINES FOR SABBATICAL LEAVE

Presbytery of Boston Committee on Ministry

The continuous learning, growth and renewal of all ministerial staff is critical to fulfill the mission of congregations. Many clergy experience burnout and/or exhaustion, lessening creativity. New directions in ministry become hurdles to cross rather than exciting opportunities for growth in Christ's kingdom.

Sabbaticals are one way to address this problem. Just as the Sabbath day is a gift from God during a busy week of work, so the greater gift of a Sabbatical Leave can allow adequate time away from normal job responsibilities for personal and professional growth, spiritual renewal, and a revitalization of vision and hope for those who labor continuously for God's people.

The content of the sabbatical is the decision of the church professional, with the concurrence of the session and the Presbytery. It is a break and change from the everyday routine and therefore should usually include a balance of reflection and prayer, rest, study and travel. It is not to be considered a vacation nor should it be used for career advancement or career assessment. It is not intended to be used as a chance to escape difficulties within the local church, nor is it a substitute for annual study leave.

A sabbatical is usually taken after the completion of seven years of service, and every seven years thereafter. It is best negotiated at the time of the call, but can be added to the call upon renegotiation. If a sabbatical was not part of the original call and the church professional is considering a sabbatical, allow at least 12-24 months discussion time before renegotiation of the contract to include sabbatical provisions.

Sabbaticals for church professionals are typically three or four months and may be extended by using vacation time and accrued study leave. (No additional study leave time is given during a sabbatical leave year. The sabbatical IS the study leave.) Sabbatical leave time does not accrue. Credit for time served toward a sabbatical in one position does not transfer to a new position unless specifically granted as a benefit in the initial contract.

The church professional who takes a sabbatical is expected to return to service for a minimum of one year following the sabbatical.

PLANNING THE SABBATICAL

The Presbytery (Committee on Ministry), the pastor and the local church are partners in a sabbatical program. Each has a role to play but central to each is encouragement and financial support.

To be eligible for a sabbatical leave, the pastor shall present to the session a written program or plan of activity for the sabbatical leave at least six months prior to the proposed beginning of the sabbatical leave. This program shall include a detailed description of the plan, travel plans and location of study, the goals to be achieved and

the expected end product, together with a personal statement as to why this sabbatical would be valuable for both the pastor and the church. Included in this plan should be the detailed description of the church's plan for pastoral coverage during the sabbatical.

Upon approval by the session, the plan shall be forwarded to the Boston Presbytery Committee on Ministry for its review and recommendation.

At the completion of the sabbatical, the pastor should present to the next regular meeting of the session a written report. This report should be forwarded to the Committee of Ministry immediately following the session meeting when it is presented. A report to the entire congregation should also be made in a timely fashion.

GETTING STARTED

If the congregation has never previously offered a sabbatical to one of its pastors, at least two year's lead time is necessary to prepare the congregation stressing the biblical, theological, and renewal context for the sabbatical. A pastor/session planning committee working together can be helpful. The first determination should be the length of the sabbatical.

Funding concerns and possible dates should be raised at least two years in advance. The dates chosen are the joint decision of the session and the pastor (in consultation with the pastor's family). Approximately one year before the sabbatical a "Who Does What" list should be developed and shared frequently with the congregation. At about the six month mark session should decide whether to seek temporary pulpit supply and if so, to begin to identify candidates. If one person is not available to fill the temporary vacancy, pulpit supply plans should be in place as well as emergency coverage and plans for hospital visitation and home visits of the sick.

FOR THE CONGREGATION

The church is responsible for the pastor's salary and benefits during her/his sabbatical leave, but not for travel costs associated with the sabbatical. Usually the congregation will suspend its monthly contribution to the travel and the professional expenses reimbursement accounts, because during the sabbatical the pastor will not perform the activities for which those accounts were designed. In a similar manner congregations will usually suspend their monthly contribution to the study leave or continuing education account [and grant no additional study leave *time* during that year] because the sabbatical is considered a study leave experience.

Thus if a pastor were to take a four-month sabbatical, the allowable reimbursements from those accounts would be only two-thirds [8/12ths, for the eight months during which the teaching elder served as pastor] of their specified annual amount.

The congregation is also responsible for the cost of temporary pastoral leadership during their pastor's absence on sabbatical – leadership that includes leading weekly worship and the regular administration of the sacraments, moderating session meetings, visitation and related pastoral care, as so forth.

Financial concerns often limit a congregation's enthusiasm for their pastor's sabbatical.

These are legitimate considerations. Occasionally volunteers have been found to cover part of a sabbatical leave. Some teaching elders are interested in only short term commitments and might make financial allowances to enable colleagues to experience leaves.

The basic two-pronged approach to financing a sabbatical leave is straightforward, if properly planned.

First, the congregation can continue to pay its pastor [at a slightly-reduced rate without contributing to the accountable reimbursement accounts] from current income, just as it always had done. This reinforces the importance of careful education and preparation of the congregation during the months leading up to the sabbatical, stressing its value and the importance of continuing stewardship.

Second, congregations can maintain a special, restricted *Sabbatical Leave Fund*, contributing to it as a regular part of each year's budget, to accumulate sufficient funds at the end of six or seven years to pay for the necessary temporary pastoral services.

As a rough rule of thumb, contributing 1/28th of the pastor's compensation to the fund each year would yield, after a full seven years [with compounding], an amount exceeding one-quarter of her/his salary, ample to finance replacement for at least one-quarter of the year, or three months.

Some congregations attempt to augment the sabbatical leave fund by more than 1/28th, in order perhaps to allow a longer sabbatical, or additional temporary services, or even a lump-sum gift to the pastor as (s)he begins the sabbatical [although any such gift would increase the pastor's effective salary and thus the Board of Pensions dues obligations, and would be taxable].

FINANCIAL PLANNING

The Lilly Endowment offers funding up to a total of \$30,000 under their National Clergy Renewal Program. More information and application materials can be requested from Lilly Endowment, Inc., 2801 North Meridian Street, P.O. Box 88068, Indianapolis, IN 46208-0068.

The Louisville Institute offers study grants for pastor leaders ranging from \$4,000 to \$12,000 depending on the length of the leave. For an application packet contact Study Grants for Pastoral Leaders, The Louisville Institute, 1044 Alta Vista Road, Louisville, KY 40205-1798. Phone: 502-895-3411, ext. 251. E mail: <mailto:into@louisvilleinstitute.org>

FOR THE FAMILY

Planning a sabbatical involves the pastor's family as well as the congregation. Because of commitments of some pastors' spouses or small children at home, many pastors prefer to take their sabbatical at home. If this is the case, it is recommended that the pastor spend at least some time on retreat or traveling. Whatever the decision, the family needs to be involved in the sabbatical planning.

RESOURCE BOOK

The book *Clergy Renewal: The Alban Guide to Sabbatical Planning* by Richard Bullock and Richard Bruesehoff, available from Alban, is a useful resource. It can be ordered from www.Alban.org

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