

Guidelines for Sabbatical / Renewal Leave

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. Exodus 20:8-11

The LORD said to Moses at Mount Sinai, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'When you enter the land I am going to give you, the land itself must observe a sabbath to the LORD. For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. But in the seventh year the land is to have a year of sabbath rest, a sabbath to the LORD. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards. Do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the grapes of your untended vines. The land is to have a year of rest. Leviticus 25:1-5

Definition

A sabbatical or renewal leave (hereafter "sabbatical") is a time of release from normal duties to devote time to intentional spiritual, emotional and mental renewal, refreshment and study; it is not a vacation or personal leave. The sabbatical may take different forms (see 'Types of Sabbatical / Renewal Leaves' below). The intent of the sabbatical is to enhance the personal ministry of the minister and to further the ministry objectives of the church. Sabbatical leaves are granted upon approval by the [official board of the church].

General Principles and Considerations

The concept of a sabbatical leave is deeply and indisputably rooted in Scripture. The word "sabbatical" is derived from the Old Testament idea of "Sabbath," a Hebrew word meaning "rest." Historically in academia (and in churches), the professionals were given a Sabbath (sabbatical) every seventh year. The observation was that academic professors and ministers were so worn out after six years of teaching and leading that they needed a year of rest, recovery, renewal, and reeducation for their field of endeavor. The assumptions were that it benefited the institution (re-energized, renewed and strengthened service and leadership). It is based on Genesis 2:1-4 in which God modeled and later required (Exodus 20:8-11) the setting aside of one-seventh of our time for restoration.¹ Among the Israelites, God instituted the sabbath year (Leviticus 25:1-5), where on every seventh year, the children of Israel were to refrain from farming the land and let the earth rest. Both the Israelites and the land benefited from the sabbath rest.

Ministers desperately need to recreate and restore what has been worn down by day-to-day encounters with reality. Nourishing one's body, mind and spirit, and regaining perspective requires a change of pace and place, perhaps in the form of a pilgrimage. Jesus provides an excellent example to follow. He actively nourished His whole person, body, mind and spirit – in prayer, in teaching, in travel, in time alone, in rest and in the caring for people. Through the way He lived, the apostles who walked and worked with Him learned from Him and benefited

¹ See also Exodus 23:12, 31:15, 34:21, 35:2; Leviticus 23:3; Deuteronomy 5:13.

as well. That is what sabbatical is about – an extended pilgrimage away from the “normal” activities of life in the exercising of the roles, functions and responsibilities of the ministry vocation and a pilgrimage into other activities which renew, restore, rebuild and rejuvenate the whole person, body, mind and spirit. A significant change of life and living for an extended period of time ultimately benefits the person, his/her family and the ministry.

Sabbatical / renewal leave typically includes time for prayer, meditation, reading, writing, resting, reflection, fasting or other diet management, traveling, visiting new places and engaging in new experiences 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. David tended sheep and learned valuable lessons about God’s care and provision. After being struck down on the road to Damascus, Paul disappeared into the desert of Arabia for three years, and emerged with a new vision. Sabbatical is a time to rest, receive, be nurtured and reflect on your relationship with God and your own story, so that the worker can be renewed, refreshed and revitalized by the breath of God.

Renewal provides opportunities for the heart to sing, but 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 even though this is contrary not only to the wisdom of biblical teachings but to all we know about learning, productivity and creativity. For peak performance, all humans need a good rhythm of work/rest. God’s people today need to re-learn the importance of Sabbath.

Sabbath is a central biblical concept. God rested from the work of creation; God also commands that very creation periodically to stop working and rest.

Biblical illustrations

Jesus’ own life and ministry reflect a deep understanding and appreciation for the rhythms of life. The demands upon Him were so great that His own ministry was punctuated with times of withdrawal for prayer and spiritual solitude. He often withdrew from the crowds, for renewal and to seek a quiet place to pray:

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Matthew 14:22-23

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Mark 1:35

Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray. Mark 6:46

Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. Luke 5:15-

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray and spent the night praying to God. Luke 6:12

Jesus did not limit these periods of withdrawal to Himself. Mark recalls Jesus telling His disciples to “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest” because “so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat.” [Mark 6:31] If Jesus needed to distance Himself on occasion from the press and clamor of the crowd to find peace and renewal of calling and purpose, how much more do modern ministers need that!

The Need for Renewal/Sabbatical

Life-long continuing education for ministry leaders is important for sustained ministry vitality. Sabbatical time for ministry staff invites participation in the rhythm established in creation, a rhythm of creativity and work, followed by restoration and renewal. In the pattern of our Lord’s life, we see intense activity and contact with people alternating with time apart, time to listen and to be replenished. Ministry sabbatical time is necessary for the ongoing growth, nourishment and renewal of those who are ordained to lead the people of God and the congregations they serve.

Sabbatical allows space and time for the renewal of vision and hope, through the gift of rest from regular work schedules; it is a gift the congregation can give to the minister in recognition of faithful ministry over an extended period of time. The daily pressures of ministry can obscure the vocation that is the foundation of the profession; sabbatical leave allows ministers the opportunity to listen to the call of the living God and to discern direction for ministry. With careful planning and good communication, ministry sabbatical may be a source of newness for the whole congregation; the time apart is an opportunity for the minister to be made new, then to preach, teach and minister from that newness in Christ.

The Purpose

The fundamental purpose of a ministry sabbatical is to allow rededication to the vocation. Therefore, sabbaticals should provide opportunities for reflection and renewal toward the end of being re-grounded in the life of God who calls us to servant leadership. Continuing education can and often should be part of sabbaticals. The vocation of ministry requires certain skills and capacities appropriate to the particular situation in which a minister serves. As needed and appropriate, the sabbatical may enable the minister to deepen and enhance existing vocational skills or to acquire new ones.

The normal expectation would be that sabbatical / renewal leave would be agreed upon only with a commitment to a mutually agreed period of continuing service.

Eligibility

A minister becomes eligible for a Sabbatical / Renewal leave when:

1. The minister has served at least $[x]^2$ full years as an ordained minister

² Typically 6 or 7 years. Consider Genesis 1, for the rest after 6 days of creation, or Deuteronomy 15 with the cancellation of debts after 7 years.

2. The minister has served at least $[x-2]$ years continuously in the congregation granting the leave
3. There has been a minimum of $[x]$ years since the previous leave
4. A Sabbatical / Renewal Leave will be limited to $[y^3]$ months
5. The minister has followed the steps outlined in “Guidelines for Implementation of Sabbatical / Renewal Leave”

All ministers fulfilling the conditions indicated above, are eligible for consideration for a sabbatical / renewal leave. There may be situations in which a minister may be eligible, yet a leave cannot be granted.

Types of Sabbatical / Renewal Leaves

A sabbatical leave may include one or more or a combination of the types of leaves listed below.

1. **Study Leave** – a study leave is taken to focus on a particular learning goal such as completion of a defined academic course/program, seminar or study. The purpose must be defined in advance and reporting should be provided by the minister regarding the progress and results of the study. The length of the leave may range from a few weeks to several months or a full year.
2. **Rest and Spiritual Renewal Leave** – Spiritual renewal and rest should be a component of every type of leave, however at times a leave may be necessary for this purpose alone. If there has been an extended or particularly intense time of pouring him/herself out for the church, the minister may need an extended time to replenish spiritual resources through prayer and reflection. This may include time at a retreat center including reading, rest, maintaining spiritual disciplines and worship and journaling. There must be clear goals set for the purpose of the leave and accountability established through formal reporting of outcomes at the conclusion of the leave.
3. **Service Leave** – On occasion a minister may have specific expertise or interests that may be needed by a sister church or organization on a short-term basis. A church may decide to release a minister for a time to fill this need. Examples may include overseas service or service to a local church agency or institution. This may include interim teaching, administrative support, return to countries previously served or helping to start a new ministry. The length of this type of leave varies depending on the situation, however, it should be defined in advance.
4. **Special Assignment** – This type of leave may include a special assignment to write children’s ministry curricula or other materials, to visit other churches/ministries, or to assist in the development of a local service ministry. This type of leave is typically a short period, usually a month or less in duration.
5. **Pastoral Exchange** – This type of leave involves a short-term exchange with another minister in a different setting. This may be an international exchange including exchange of homes and jobs while retaining current salary. This may also include an exchange within North America with a minister of a different cultural congregation. Typically this type of leave would be two to six months, however it may be longer depending on the situation. The duration should be defined in advance.

³ Typically 3 to 6 months. The length of the leave may vary according to the need which it is intended to meet and the objectives which it proposes to fulfill (e.g., educational courses of study)

Note: in situations where travel is required, especially to the developing world, insurance may be impacted. The individual taking the sabbatical must discuss any potential concerns regarding coverage with the administrative staff of the church or the insurance brokers.

Additional Considerations

1. **What are the potential benefits to the church?** A church is a body that requires the contribution of all members. At times, ministry staff roles may be seen as not only leadership and equipping roles, but also for completing much of the work required for effective ministry. Having a staff member away provides opportunity for others in the church to step up to use their gifts. A planned leave is a healthier alternative for the church than a forced time away due to burnout or health concerns. In addition, the larger church may benefit from ministers who are available for short-term assignments. The exchange of ideas, gifts and resources can strengthen the witness of the church of Jesus Christ.
2. **Sabbatical Costs?** The church continues to pay the full salary of the individual taking the leave. In situations where the leave may be longer in duration, the church may determine to pay only a portion of the salary if extended past the agreement. Depending on the type of leave, such a service or exchange leave, there may be ministry costs which the church may agree to cover.
3. **Will programs be affected?** By ensuring that adequate preparation is made and alternative leadership is in place well in advance of the sabbatical, there should be minimum disruption to ongoing programs. This further supports the need to apply for a sabbatical leave well in advance of the intended start date.
4. **Will attendance be affected if the senior 'preaching' minister takes a sabbatical?** Having regular 'preaching' ministers provides sustained and consistent ministry, however a church may also benefit from contributions of other preachers, from inside and outside of the church. Many churches may find that this provides further opportunity for others to develop their speaking gifts. A church may also consider hiring an interim minister to provide continuity during the leave.
5. **Will the minister come back?** Typically the minister will come back refreshed, renewed and eager to continue his/her ministry within the church. Depending on the situation, there may be an expectation built into the sabbatical agreement that the minister will agree to serve a pre-determined amount of time after the leave, for example, one (1) year. Ministers who take periodic leaves typically stay longer in their congregations. On occasion, a minister may determine during a leave that a permanent change is needed. There is little advantage to the church to insist a minister fulfill the obligation of a pre-defined term if his/her enthusiasm for the ministry is gone.
6. **What should a congregation do?** Discuss and determine what your approach will be to sabbatical leaves before a minister asks for one, recognizing and anticipating the benefits the church will see from a well-planned approach. A policy should be developed defining parameters around frequency, length, costs, etc., to provide a framework for sabbatical requests. There should be some flexibility built into the policy to allow for different types of leaves and the specific requests. Upon receipt of a proposal for a leave, the details should be negotiated with the minister and a written agreement drafted. A checklist should be completed to ensure all relevant details and tasks have been completed.

7. **What should a minister do?** Talk with the official board or leadership team about the church's sabbatical leave policy. Determine when you may consider taking advantage of the policy, keeping in mind the opportunities that may be available for different types of leaves. It is best to begin thinking about this a year in advance or longer if your church has not previously offered sabbatical leaves. Seek counsel from colleagues and others about effective ways to use a leave. Develop a proposal to present to the appropriate leadership team. It is wise to have a sabbatical mentor or mentoring team established to provide guidance prior to and during the sabbatical.

Appendix 1
SABBATICAL / RENEWAL POLICY
(*'Church Name'*)
Adopted by the Church Board on (*'date'*)

Purpose of Sabbatical / Renewal Leave

We, the congregation of (*'Church Name'*), wish to provide long-term ministry staff and their family the opportunity of a sabbatical / renewal leave for the purpose of professional development, personal and spiritual renewal, rest, and visioning. By means of a sabbatical/renewal leave, the congregation wishes to express gratitude and affirmation to our ministers and their families.

Concurrent with the sabbatical/renewal leave, it is the intent that the church will be challenged to a special time of renewal as well as an enlarged vision of its ministry.

Terms of Sabbatical/Renewal Leave Policy

1. The term "minister" in this policy refers to paid ministry leaders.
2. A minister shall receive up to [y] months of sabbatical leave for every [x] years of continuous service to the church.
3. The length of the sabbatical leave should not normally exceed six (6) months.
4. At its discretion the church may determine to set different eligibility and duration criteria for the minister.
5. The church, at its discretion, may give credit for years of service at a prior church if no sabbatical time was granted in that setting. Time allowed for additional educational needs may be considered in the decision.
6. No more than one member of the ministry staff may be on sabbatical leave at any one time.
7. The applicant must submit a sabbatical proposal for approval by the decision-making structure within the church (i.e., Board of Directors, Elders Board, Leadership Group) outlining how the sabbatical time will be invested. Sabbatical proposals should reflect a balance of physical rest/recreation, intellectual stimulation and spiritual renewal. Sufficient family time should also be included.
8. Sabbatical time is separate and distinct from the minister's yearly vacation time. Vacation time accrued during the sabbatical year will be prorated.
9. The minister will submit a report to the (governing board) and the congregation after the completion of the sabbatical outlining how the time was invested and the benefits that were realized.
10. The minister's full wages and benefits will continue for the duration of the sabbatical. No compensation should be given for any unused sabbatical time. In situations where circumstances require the sabbatical to extend past six (6) months in duration, the church may at its discretion determine to pay only a portion of the minister's salary.
11. Agreement will be made between the minister and the church to continue to serve for a minimum of [1 or 2] years with the church after completion of the sabbatical.
12. The church should give appropriate recognition upon the commencement and conclusion of the sabbatical period.

13. It is understood that while on sabbatical leave the minister is relieved from all routine and emergency duties during the time granted. Alternate leaders will handle routine and emergency matters during the duration of the sabbatical.
14. Official board (or ...) discretion will be applied for individual circumstances which fall outside of the above terms.
15. The purpose of this policy is for direction and is not intended to be all inclusive. Proposed changes or additions in the above policy may be submitted to the Official board (or...) for review and approval.

Appendix 2
SABBATICAL CHECKLIST – Annual Tasks
(‘Church Name’)

	Task	Start Date	End Date	Responsibility
	Review and update Sabbatical Policy			Official Board
	Communicate policy to ministry staff			Official Board
	Identify staff where sabbatical may be applicable			Official Board
	Obtain and read Sabbatical Policy			Ministry staff

Completed by: _____

Date: _____

SABBATICAL CHECKLIST (‘Church Name’)

Applicant Name: _____

Note: Frequency infers that the tasks noted should occur at a minimum in the timeframe noted.

Frequency: 6 months to 1 year prior to beginning of Sabbatical

	Task	Start Date	End Date	Responsibility
	Contact experienced churches or leadership structure for advice/support on the process			Official Board and/or ministry staff
	Submit application for Sabbatical Leave including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nature of leave - Start date and duration of leave - Specific goals for sabbatical - Outline of goals and expected outcome(s) 			Ministry staff
	Establish sabbatical mentor or mentoring team			Ministry staff
	Document terms of sabbatical leave			Official Board
	Agree to terms of sabbatical leave as documented			Official Board and ministry staff
	Plan for alternate leadership			Official Board and/or ministry staff
	Hire interim ministry, if applicable			Official Board

Frequency: One month prior to beginning of Sabbatical

	Task	Start Date	End Date	Responsibility
	Communicate plans to congregation			Official Board and/or ministry staff
	Where covered by the church benefit program, submit written notice to the insurance carrier(s). Notice must include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Start & End Date of sabbatical - Applicable salary changes - Out-of-country travel plans 			Ministry staff
	Make final arrangements for duties to be covered during absence			Ministry staff

Frequency: One month after completion of Sabbatical

	Task	Start Date	End Date	Responsibility
	Submit written report to Official Board outlining use of time and benefit realized			Ministry staff
	Provide written or verbal report to congregation regarding the sabbatical			Ministry staff