

# SABBATICALS... THE NECESSARY OPTION

A guide to planning and implementing a sabbatical leave  
that will benefit both the pastor and the church



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# PASTORAL SABBATICAL POLICY

## A HANDBOOK FOR PLANNING

The following document is to serve as a template for churches to develop standing policies for Sabbatical or Renewal Leaves for their pastoral staffs. It is the desire of Pinnacle Ministries that all churches adopt some form of official renewal leave policy, for the health of the pastoral family, for the health of the church, and for the ultimate health of the Kingdom of God.

### SABBATICALS: ARE THEY REALLY NEEDED?

When the subject of sabbatical leave is raised, it is often met with a chorus of questions. High on the list is some form of, "Why should the pastor have a sabbatical? Neither I nor any of my associates have one! The business world is hard, too!" While the concept of sabbaticals has long been recognized in the academic community, the church (and especially the evangelical church) has seldom recognized their value. When research was undertaken to develop this policy, what little information that could be found came almost exclusively from a mainline denominational perspective. With such little recognition, again the question could be raised: "Are they really necessary?" Let's address that question from a practical and Biblical perspective.

### RENEWAL: A BREAK FROM THE PRESSURE COOKER

In his book, "Support Your Local Pastor", Wes Roberts quotes from a revealing survey of pastors conducted by the Fuller Institute of Church Growth. This survey, as quoted by Dr. Arch Hart of Fuller Seminary at the CareGivers Forum in November 1991, reported the following frightening statistics:

- 90% work more than forty-six hours per week, and often more than sixty.
- 80% believe that pastoral ministry is affecting their family negatively.
- 33% say that, "Being in ministry is clearly a hazard to my family."
- 75% have reported a significant crisis due to stress at least once every five years in their ministry.
- 50% feel unable to meet the needs of the job.
- 90% feel they were not adequately trained to cope with the ministry demands placed upon them.
- 40% report having a serious conflict with a parishioner at least once a month.
- 37% have been involved in inappropriate sexual behavior with someone in the church.
- 70% have a lower self-image after they've pastored than when they started.<sup>1</sup>

Why, do you ask, is this true? Roberts answers with the following bit of musing:

The lawyer can refuse to take on a client. The pastor may feel like refusing to see someone come into his congregation, but that is not his privilege. The doctor can refer out to another doctor when it is best for the patient - or him. The pastor is not often prone to send people to another church, though he may be thinking that in tough moments. The electrician can say, "I can't fix your problem for two days," and we can call the next

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1 Roberts, Wes, *Support Your Local Pastor*, (NavPress-Colorado Springs, CO. 1995) page 19.

service person on our list, who can come out right away. The pastor (even one who is wise with his schedule) is on duty twenty-seven hours a day, thirty-nine days a month, 412 days a year. People seem to have no respect when they experience their emergencies, when they honestly need pastoral attention. At least the ones in our lives haven't been well scheduled.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, this "lament" says it well:

I am appalled at what is required of me.  
I am supposed to move from sick-bed  
to administrative meeting,  
to planning,  
to supervising,  
to counseling,  
to praying,  
to trouble-shooting,  
to budgeting,  
to audio systems,  
to meditation,  
to worship preparation,  
to newsletter,  
to staff problems,  
to mission projects,  
to conflict management,  
to community leadership,  
to study,  
to funerals,  
to weddings,  
to preaching.



I am supposed to be "in charge"  
but not too in charge,  
administrative executive,  
sensitive pastor,  
skillful counselor,  
dynamic public speaker,  
spiritual guide,  
politically savvy,  
intellectually sophisticated.

And I am expected to be superior,  
or at least first rate, in all of them.

I am not supposed to be  
depressed,  
discouraged,  
cynical,  
angry,  
hurt.

I am supposed to be  
up-beat,  
positive,  
strong,  
willing,

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* page 18.

available.

Right now I am not filling any of those expectations very well.  
I think that's why I am tired.<sup>3</sup>

One could go on and on concerning the pressures of the pastorate. One final observation should be made, however. What really sets the pastoral pressures off from the many pressures most people face in their jobs is the lack of opportunity available to relieve the building stress. In today's economic reality many pastors' wives work. With limited weekend time for family and generally a certain amount of financial stress, finding "release points" becomes an exercise in extreme creativity.

As evangelicals, however, we must ask ourselves an additional question: "Is it Biblical?" For no matter how pragmatic a situation is, if it lacks Biblical support, it's not for us.

### RENEWAL - THE BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

The following is not to be considered an in-depth treatment, but rather the observation of a Biblical principle. Note the following verses (all quotations taken from the NIV):

"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 manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. 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

"There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, a day of sacred assembly. You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a Sabbath to the LORD."

Leviticus 23:3

"But in the seventh year the land is to have a sabbath of 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 25:4-5

Clearly in Scripture there is a work/rest design, both for a short-term cycle (weekly) and an extended cycle (the year of Jubilee). In fact, the extended cycle was taken so seriously that that Lord commanded the return of land to its original owners after fifty years ("In this Year of Jubilee everyone is to return to his own property." Leviticus 25:13).

In the New Testament two important examples exist to help us see the pattern (although we don't often see them in that light). After thirty some years of living, and just before entering the most demanding and stressful time of His life, Jesus spent forty days alone to fast, pray and reflect. Further, the Apostle Paul, following his conversion and earliest ministry, spent time in obscurity in his home area before Barnabas sought him out for his "life's work" (Acts 11:25).

While neither of these episodes could be called a sabbatical in any contemporary sense of the word, they illustrate a point. An investment in reflection and renewal only serves to enhance a servant of Christ's ministry. If the contemporary church is truly interested in productivity for the Kingdom, and not just in hours clocked in, we would do well to consider the example.

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3 Gilbert, Barbara, *Who Ministers to Ministers?* (The Alban Institute, Inc.-Washington, DC)

## SABBATICALS - HOW DO THEY WORK?

There often is much confusion about what a sabbatical actually is. One of the best summaries is one offered by David Ellingson: "...a time to relearn and rehearse that critical capacity to reflect, which transforms dreams of vacation to new visions of vocations."<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the best way to begin is with what a sabbatical is *not*.

A Sabbatical Is Not Vacation "Boy, six weeks of additional paid vacation - it must be nice!" Ask the average person in the pew, and that is likely to be the response when confronted with the idea of a sabbatical. While a sabbatical *is* a time of rest, it's not vacation. Proper sabbaticals involve a plan, a goal and accountability. Sabbatical times, however, should be taken in addition to any earned vacation time.

A Sabbatical Is Not Academic Leave Earning advanced degrees is a commendable goal. Every pastor should be in the process of life-long learning. But theological education is strenuous work and not always conducive to vision building. Rev. Colin Buckland, Executive Director of The Claybury Trust (a "pastor to pastor" organization) says it well:

Some people may well be looking for and needing a theological update but others are not. Some require a time of spiritual refreshment and a seminary may not be the best setting for this. This 'academic' view takes no account of the emotional 'burn' that may have been taking place in the life of the pastor, it makes no provision for it. The academic view takes little note of the need for wife and family to experience sabbatical as a 'living part' of the ministry, it does not allow for family renewal and my findings are that family life has been greatly strained by the ministry. The academic view may provide the pastor with an event that feeds only part of his real need and therefore fails to renew him thoroughly for his ongoing ministry.<sup>5</sup>

The Sabbatical Is Not Escape The ministry that has reached a point where the pastor needs a specified time off to escape the problems of ministry has troubles too deep to be solved by a renewal leave. In addition, no ethical pastor would use a sabbatical leave as a time to seek out a new place of ministry. That would leave too many hurt feelings and damaged trust.

The sabbatical *is* a time of renewal and recharging. Roberts suggests every sabbatical should include the "8 R's": Relax, Recreation (play!), Rest, Renewal, Revival, Rethinking, Refocusing, Return.<sup>6</sup>

"Like Sisyphus and the rock, there is a repetitiveness and intensity involved in ministry that exacts its price in weariness of spirit, diminished enthusiasm, a dulling of the capacity to be creative, and a loss of vision and perspective."<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the best image of the sabbatical is that of a pilgrim in search of a fresh touch from God.

So, what marks an effective sabbatical? Perhaps it is best not to look for a formal set of guidelines to guide every church. That assumes we have cookie-cutter churches and die-cast pastors. Perhaps a

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4 Ellingson, David, *Remember the Sabbatical to Keep It Holy*, Where Word and World Engage: Campus Ministry Communications, Division of Campus Ministries and Educational Service, Lutheran Church in the USA, 35 E. Wacker Dr. 1847, Chicago, IL 60601, May 1980.

5 Personal correspondence with the author.

6 Roberts, page 120.

7 Bullock, A. Richard, *Sabbatical Planning for Clergy & Congregations*, The Alban Institute, Inc, Washington, D.C. page 3.

better approach is to list some of the critical elements that make for a successful sabbatical, and let the churches improvise freely on the theme. The goal isn't so much how renewal leaves occur, but that they *do* occur.

## THE CRITICAL LIST

The following are some of the critical elements of sabbatical planning.

### *1. Intentionality*

Sabbaticals should not be an afterthought or a response to an emergency. They should be carefully planned so as to have maximum benefit. This involves a number of critical issues.

**Time frame** - The time frame of a sabbatical can be approached from a number of perspectives. Typically, the word sabbatical connotes some time off every seven years. But in today's environment, that might be a less than optimal time. Some churches have a policy that senior staff accrue a day and a half sabbatical for every month served, and associate staff a day for every month served. Another potential is looking at increments of five, ten, fifteen and twenty years of service, with increasing time available each period (one month, two months, three months, six months?). The key issue is that a pastor has both incentive for staying longer periods of time, and built-in points of refreshment when they do. Good sabbatical plans should cover at least 20 years of ministry. See the addendum for some sample approaches.

**Costs** - Sabbatical leaves incur costs to both the pastor and the church. The pastor's full salary and benefit package should continue during the sabbatical (let's not work to alleviate one stress, only to create another!). The Catholic church addresses this need among their priests by setting aside a regular portion of their salary for sabbatical leaves. This is then matched by the diocese when the leave is taken. Churches and pastor could plan appropriate set-asides so that after a given period of time both had sufficient funds to cover the experience.

**Continuation of Ministry** - The work needs to go on whether the pastor is present or not. This means covering not only the pulpit, but appropriate visitation, secretarial needs and directions and leadership issues. Adequate plans need to be in place so that remaining staff (permanent, part-time or volunteer) are not overworked or required to enact decisions beyond their authority. Denominational offices can be of help in finding adequate interim or pulpit supply, or in setting up a workable program for a church. Someone has remarked that when the pastor goes on a sabbatical, the church goes on a sabbatical as well. Fresh input can be as energizing to a church as it can to a pastor. The key is to plan well.

### *2. Congregational Involvement*

In light of the above observation, the church needs to be a part of the process. This can be a positive experience! Take, for example, the experience of one church:

...when one Minnesota pastor took a sabbatical to study spirituality, he worked out a reading list for himself and the congregation. Before he left, the congregation gathered for a weekend retreat to study the subject. Then while their pastor was gone, members worked on the reading and discussed it in classes. Part of this church's mutual plan was for both pastor and congregation to share their common yet different journeys in exploring the subject of spirituality upon his return.<sup>8</sup>

A good sabbatical experience should cause growth for all concerned.

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8 Bullock, page 6.

### 3. Accountability

A renewal leave is not just time off; it is time to renew. Whether the plan calls for reading, research, reflection, retreating or writing, it should be done under some form of accountability. The use of a spiritual director or mentor may well be advised. This would be an individual who would serve as a "reality check" for the person on sabbatical. This should *not* be a person from the leadership team of the church; very likely another area pastor could serve in this role. As one person who oversees retreats and sabbaticals said: "I believe that pastors would do well to be encouraged to see a Mentor or a Counselor for the '15,000 mile service', during their sabbaticals. Self-awareness maintains health."<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, sabbaticals should not be so tightly structured that the Spirit has no freedom to lead and reveal. If the goal of a sabbatical is to renew one's vision and commitment, then the Spirit may lead us in ways only He knows. Every plan should have a certain amount of available flexibility.

### 4. Family involvement

It's not just the pastor under the pressure cooker these days - his whole family shares the load. A good sabbatical plan will allow for some form of family renewal. This is the shortcoming of purely academic sabbaticals. The pastor gets the degree and the family gets left behind! As Colin Buckland remarks:

Some pastors cannot see the needs of their family and plan to leave them for months. Some of these families have struggled with the absence of the husband/father and need to have a time of renewal only to see this opportunity taken away as the pastor goes off for 'HIS' sabbatical.<sup>10</sup>

Joint mission adventures, at least during a part of the pastor's time, can only be a healthy investment. Even family travel as the pastor makes a pilgrimage to a particularly significant place or ministry can make for a family sabbatical investment. One pastor planned a sabbatical leave that involved taking his son on a world-spanning missions tour! No one will have to teach that young man the value of missions in the future.

### 5. Feedback & Reinvestment

While congregational involvement looks to the preparation for a sabbatical, feedback speaks of sharing with the church as a result of a renewal experience. The church should be helped to see the benefits of the investment they made in their pastor's life. Whether it's new programs or a fresh vision, or simply new vitality in the pulpit, pain should be taken to link results with the sabbatical leave. In that way, the church will continue to be receptive to future sabbatical experiences. This is especially true for churches experiencing their first sabbatical experience.

## SABBATICALS - THE NECESSARY OPTION

"I truly long to be a spiritual leader. I no longer want to be a manager of a church or CEO of a nonprofit corporation.' - from a pastor in Tennessee."<sup>11</sup> Is there not one of us in ministry who would not echo that statement? We live in challenging, difficult times. But such times always hold the dual potential of great disaster or great victory. Usually, the difference is due to godly, inventive and faith-oriented decisions. The evangelical church does not have a tradition of the sabbatical leave. To our shame, more than once the sentiment is heard, "We shoot our wounded!" Pinnacle Ministries strongly encourages

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<sup>9</sup> Colin Buckland - personal correspondence with the author.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> London, H.B. and Wiseman, Neil, *Pastors At Risk*, Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1993, page 173.

churches to take a bold step by adopting a formal sabbatical policy. Such an investment will not go unnoticed by the Chief Shepherd. Pinnacle Ministries stands ready to help in any way necessary.

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## **Addendum A: Sample Sabbatical Frameworks**

How does one program for sabbaticals? There seems to be no one right way. The following are sample policies from a number of churches that can serve as templates for your own sabbatical development.

### An Evangelical Denomination Church - Northern Wisconsin

Pastoral Personal Development Leave (Study Leave). Personal development leave is for professional growth that will benefit our church.

1. Leave will accrue at 1.5 weeks per year of service at \_\_\_\_\_ Baptist Church.
2. A pastor must serve a minimum of 2 years before scheduling any leave.
3. All personal development leave must be scheduled and approved by the Church Council. The Administrative Committee will make a recommendation based upon a review of all the pastor's schedules and the purpose of the leave with the assurance that all ministries will be properly carried on.
4. A pastor will serve a minimum of 6 months following the use of any personal development leave.
5. Accrued personal development leave is forfeited when a pastor resigns. The church Council may waive this in the case of a tendered resignation.

### A Large Evangelical Church -Suburban Chicago, IL

Sabbatical leave may be granted to full-time pastoral staff members of \_\_\_\_\_ Church for the pursuit of activities as approved by the Council of Elders. The following stipulations and requirements will apply:

1. Sabbaticals may be approved for six months at the culmination of each seven years of full-time ministry at the Church. Each staff member may apply vacation time earned to extend his leave to a maximum of one month.
2. Full salary and benefits will be paid during the leave.
3. A detailed proposal for use of a sabbatical leave will be presented to the Council of Elders at the time of application for leave. Applications should be presented six months prior to expected leave. The council has the right to deny leave for sabbaticals it feels does not meet its approval.
4. The intent of sabbatical leave is to further the ministry of our church.
5. Upon returning, the staff member taking a sabbatical leave will give a report to the Council of Elders on what was achieved during the leave.