

COMMITTEE ON MINISTRY  
PRESBYTERY OF DENVER

PARAMETERS FOR A SABBATICAL LEAVE POLICY

"The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath, so  
the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath"  
MARK 2:27-28 RSV

Sabbatical times remind us that life must be renewed. From the beginning of creation God established times for us to cease our striving and set aside our work in order to renew and recenter our lives. These times, whether they be a night of rest, a day of worship each week, or a fallow time every seven years, are called sabbaticals.

The Committee on Ministry, Presbytery of Denver endorses the concept and practice of sabbatical leave for pastors. A few churches in the presbytery now have sabbatical leave policies. The Committee on Ministry highly recommends and encourages each session and church to establish a Sabbatical Leave Policy for pastors.

To assist sessions and churches in this endeavor, these parameters are suggested for consideration.

**RATIONALE:** The enormous demands of the ministry are recognized by nearly everyone. The constant pressures of preparing for and leading worship, counseling, visitation, facilitating committees, administrative duties, dealing with crisis situations, and community and denominational commitments are realities faced by pastors every week. These challenges are met month after month, year after year, with virtually no let up in the schedule.

A sabbatical leave provides an opportunity for a pastor to be nurtured. The renewing power of sabbatical time allows time for replenishment, revitalization, new vision, and refreshment of the soul. It can be a time of travel, personal study, reflection, contemplation, rest and prayer. Or it can be any combination of these and other events.

The value of a sabbatical is not just to the pastor, but to the entire church. The church receives back a pastor who is revived, replenished, nurtured and ready for further faithful service to the church.

The sabbatical time can be a time when the church is also on sabbatical and experiences new leadership and new possibilities. More about this under Planning.

**ELIGIBILITY:** Typically, sabbatical leave policies stipulate that pastors will be eligible for a sabbatical for a specific number of months, after serving the church for a specific number of years. Usually the sabbatical is between three to six or nine months, after serving a church between four to seven years.

Ordinarily the sabbatical needs to be taken all at once rather than spreading it over a year. Generally pastors are able to defer their sabbatical for a year or two.

Sabbatical leave may not be a terminal leave. In accepting a sabbatical, the pastor needs to agree to return to the church for at least a specified length of time (usually one year).

**RELATIONSHIP TO VACATION AND STUDY LEAVE:** The pastor's vacation time is not counted as sabbatical time. Usually provision is made to allow the pastor to take vacation time immediately before and after the sabbatical. This practice is suggested to provide transition time for the pastor.

In the sabbatical year, the sabbatical is normally taken in lieu of study leave ordinarily due that year.

**COMPENSATION:** During the leave period the pastor on sabbatical continues to be compensated at the normal rate of pay, including Board of Pension dues.

Some sabbatical leave policies allow the option of a pastor taking a longer sabbatical with reduced

compensation. For example, rather than six months at full pay, the pastor opts for half pay for a full year.

In cases where the local church is unable to totally fund a sabbatical, the Presbytery through the Committee on Ministry may have limited resources to assist in funding a sabbatical leave.

**PURPOSES OF SABBATICAL LEAVE:** Usually sabbatical leave policies outline specific purposes for a leave. An example of purposes:

1. **RENEWAL.** The sabbatical is time to step back from the continuous responsibilities of church work; to renew and replenish the reservoirs of creativity and spirituality, and to seek refreshment and renewal through a change of environment and respite from routine.

2. **REFLECTION.** The period of renewal often opens into a period of reflection\_ This may take such form as study, further training, spiritual renewal, a review of accomplishments and challenges faced, or entering into a relationship with a mentor.

3. **RECOMMITMENT.** It is expected that the sabbatical will lead to a recommitment to ministry in the church, perhaps with a new focus or new direction born of reflection, and with new energy.

**APPLICATION AND APPROVAL.** Generally a pastor eligible for a sabbatical is asked to apply for the leave about three months in advance and prepare a Sabbatical Proposal for the Session. The proposal includes dates of leave requested, the purposes of the leave and how the sabbatical time will be spent to achieve the purposes\_ The proposal should allow for the flexibility to explore a promising new direction, rather than an inflexible, rigid schedule.

The proposal should also include plans for coverage of pastoral duties and responsibilities during the sabbatical, in order to provide for continued ministry to the congregation.

The grant of a sabbatical leave requires the approval of the Session.

**PLANNING.** It seems wise to include the Session or a sub-committee of the Session in the overall planning of a sabbatical. Sabbatical time can be a time of renewal for the church as well as the pastor. For example, one church arranged to do some special spiritual reading, which the pastor was also reading. Upon the pastor's return, they shared some common journeys\_

During a sabbatical, the day to day administrative duties fall heavily upon the secretary and the interim or temporary pastor. Careful planning needs to take place to prepare a thorough list of who does what and when. Spelling out clear lines of responsibilities and contingencies can help avoid problems.

A sabbatical is a time away for the pastor. The expectation is that the pastor not be in regular contact with the congregation or staff on a week to week basis or be involved in church activities, events or problems\_

**REPORT UPON RETURN.** Usually upon returning from taking a sabbatical the pastor is asked to submit a written report to the Session, providing an overview of the sabbatical experience. The report includes ways the purposes of the sabbatical have been fulfilled

**ESTABLISHING A SABBATICAL FUND.** Some churches have found it practical to establish and budget for a fund to accumulate moneys to *meet* anticipated sabbatical needs.

**ASSISTANCE.** The Session would like assistance in developing a sabbatical leave policy, please contact the Moderator of the Committee on [Ministry.COM](#) has some sample policies and resources to share.

**RESOURCES USED:** Sabbatical Planning for Clergy & Congregations by A Richard Bullock ( An Alban Institute Publication). Mountview Boulevard Presbyterian Church, Sabbatical Leave Policy. Sabbatical Leave Policy of the Presbyterian Church of Sunnyvale, California.