

MINISTERIAL SABBATICALS

When a minister serves a congregation for six years or longer, it is time for a sabbatical. An extended time away for the purpose of study, enrichment, vision casting, travel, rest, prayer and/or visiting different cultures provides the needed respite that is pivotal in helping assure continued healthy leadership. Congregations may be strengthened by offering a pastor or an associate a sabbatical—time to briefly step away from the cyclical, unending demands of daily parish life.

A sabbatical is not a vacation. Rather it is a time for intentional exploration and reflection, for drinking anew from God’s life-giving waters, and for regaining the enthusiasm and creativity for ministry.

Genesis and Leviticus speak of “Sabbath time” in terms of days, years, and land usage. Since the Sabbath is recognized as a distinctive time in creation—as a gift of rest for both renewal and hope—Scripture infers that regular, periodic rejuvenation is vital in all areas of life. The Old Testament writers directed a time period for the soil to remain untilled so that it could replenish itself. Just like the soil, humans need a season to lie fallow for revitalization of the body, mind, and soul. Dave Ellingson declared, “We require a time to receive rather than give, to get input rather than give output, to carefully nurture and cultivate our lives so that the soul of our spirits might be rid of weeds and have an opportunity to receive nourishment (Ellingson, page 2).”

Pastors, associates, and ministry leaders are called to the work of ministry as servants of the church. Because of the spiritual dimension of leadership and the emotional energy required by the task, ministers often get into a “give and give and give, but never receive” treadmill. When there is little relief from the constant pressure of Sunday morning deadlines, committee meetings, counseling sessions, visitation schedules, community commitments, and a host of other day-to-day encounters, a leader might scream, “Stop the world. I want to get off.” Greg Asimakoupoulos discovered in his weariness, “Much of my depression was actually my body’s muffled cry for rest (Asimakoupoulos, page 102).”

A sabbatical allows the minister to get off the treadmill in exchange for a battery recharge of vision and hope. It creates an opportunity for the minister to:

- recapture a sense of vision,
- be nurtured in faith and skills,
- become introspective,
- rekindle spiritual passion,
- refocus priorities,
- review the ministerial journey, and
- reflect on the call of God for life and ministry.

A sabbatical feeds the body, mind, and soul resulting in renewed, refreshed, and revitalized energy to function as a shepherd and servant leader. Several clergy persons have expressed “ah-ha” moments as a result of the sabbatical journey. Often, the sabbatical extends the pastor’s tenure with a congregation. When the minister returns with a renewed vision, the congregation often opens a new, exciting chapter in congregational ministry.

A congregation would be well advised to establish a sabbatical policy which determines at what point in the minister's tenure a sabbatical may occur, the length of time that may be taken, and a process for evaluating the experience. For example, one church established a policy providing for a three-month sabbatical after the minister had completed six years of service to the congregation (associates were included in the same sabbatical policy). Following the sabbatical, the minister was asked to report on the experience. In addition, a questionnaire was developed for congregational evaluation of church life while the pastor or associate was gone. The survey helped the leadership prepare for the next sabbatical leave.

Issues centering on finances often surface when the subject of ministerial sabbaticals is raised. In many cases, congregations may declare, "We can't afford it." This kind of reaction is more likely if the church is experiencing a budget crisis at the time of a sabbatical leave request or has failed to make adequate preparations for the funding of sabbaticals.

Careful planning, however, can assure a sabbatical's fiscal feasibility. Assuming a sabbatical policy of two to three months is granted after six years of ministry, a simple formula may be written into the yearly church budget enabling an amount, equal to one to four weeks of a minister's salary, to be set aside for sabbatical reserve. After six years, the accumulated amount would be available from the reserve fund. The same formula would continue during a sabbatical year, providing for ministerial continuing education expenses and travel costs, as well as monies to pay interim expenses. If invested, the reserve funds could collect interest and further enhance an excellent resource pool for sabbatical expenses.

A sabbatical allows the minister to be away from the congregation for an extended time period. In all cases, there needs to be a backup plan for crisis moments. An interim pastor or a minister-on-call should be available to provide pastoral care and leadership during emergency experiences. The lay leaders and/or pastoral staff need to clarify lines of authority, logistical issues, visitation patterns, newcomer follow-up, and a host of other issues during the minister's absence.

It is best to establish a single, key contact person who is designated to interact with the minister during the sabbatical. This contact person may call the minister on an "as necessary" basis. To cite a specific example of such a necessity, one pastor was contacted when the church was struck by lightning and burned to the ground.

Except in such dire emergencies, however, the minister should be free to experience the sabbatical unhindered by the routine of congregational life. When a plan is established, congregational life generally runs smoothly and efficiently during the sabbatical.

A minister should design a sabbatical that is unique to his/her personal requirements. When Jesus retreated, he went to a mountain or out on a boat. He designed his time away based on the inner needs in his life. Ministers should do the same.

Sabbaticals should be planned with the church's leadership. A written sabbatical plan gives objective focus and a common, agreed-upon understanding of the purpose and goals for the time away. Elements of the sabbatical should be strategically planned to give balanced time for personal relaxation and other components such as education, travel, etc. Ingredients of a sabbatical proposal include:

- What the minister desires to accomplish during the sabbatical.
- A description of the sabbatical plan, with timelines and activities.

- Detailed congregational leadership assignments during the minister's absence.
- A specific declaration of expected budget expenses.
- The preparation of an evaluation form to assess church life during the sabbatical.

Preparation for a sabbatical requires time. It could take as long as one year to contemplate and finalize the plan and to position leadership for the absence of a minister. Intentional planning is absolutely necessary. The time investment is well worth it, however.

Vibrant, healthy congregations are led by vigorous, effective ministers. To retain the spark of dynamic leadership, a minister needs to step away from the intensity of daily ministry for breathing space. During a respite from leadership, pastoring, administrating, counseling, comforting, and fundraising, the minister may learn, grow, and renew his/her personal wellsprings of faith and commitment. Following a sabbatical, a minister often resumes congregational leadership with a fresh spirit and a renewed passion.

ENDNOTES

Asimakoupoulos, Greg. "Renewing Your Strength," *Leadership*, Vol, III, No. 3, Summer 1982.

Bullock, A. Richard. *Sabbatical Planning for Clergy and Congregations*. An Alban Institute Publication, 1987 (Reprinted in 1998).

Ellingson, David. *Remember the Sabbath 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.

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