

Sabbatical Policy and Overview

Sabbatical Purpose:

A sabbatical is a Biblical concept. In Genesis 2:2-3 God rested from His labors on the seventh day. Later, in Exodus 20:8, we read that God's people are to keep the Sabbath holy. This was part of the covenant God established with Israel. Instead of working more, God told His people not to work on the seventh day of the week. In Mark 2:27 Jesus said, ""The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

So, what does all this mean? God wants us to heed His instructions. Everyone needs to take time to rest and be in God's presence. This is especially true for pastors as the shepherds of God's flock. The very word "Sabbath" literally means "to rest, to cease, to desist." Rest provides each person the ability to prepare for work, have energy for family, and to fulfill our God-given calling.

For pastors, an extended time of rest is a season for refreshment physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. It is a season to disconnect from the demands of ministry and caring for others so God can renew the leader and bring cleansing, hope and deep revitalization of the soul. Often, people of God overlook the need for pastors to be required to spend time listening to God speak. God's leaders must be completely dependent on Him. Writer and pastor, Eugene Peterson shares this crucial piece of wisdom:

"If we are going to take sabbaticals, let them be real sabbaticals: a willed passivity in order to be restored to alert receptivity to spirit-prayer, silence, solitude, worship...The original intent of sabbath is a time to be silent and listen to God, not attend lectures; a time to be in solitude and be with God, not "interact" with fatigued peers. If help is to be given to the pastor in midcourse, it is not going to come by infusion of intellect but by renewal of spirit. (Eugene Peterson, "Sabbatical Is Not Study leave." Leadership Journal, winter 1988:74-75).

A Sabbatical Provides Stress Relief:

A pastoral sabbatical is a time to reflect on God's grace and find restoration, healing and hope. The reality is that pastors do not feel the ability to take time off for rest and reflection. As wonderful as ministry is on several levels, there can be no denial that there are negative effects of ministry as well. Due to stress overload and inadequate soul care for the shepherd, stress takes its toll on those called by God.

In one study the following statistics came to light:

- 75% of pastors report being "extremely stressed" or "highly stressed"
- 90% work between 55 to 75 hours per week
- 90% feel fatigued and worn out every week
- 40% report a serious conflict with a parishioner at least once a month

- 78% were forced to resign from their church (63% at least twice), most commonly because of church conflict
- 80% will not be in ministry ten years later and only a fraction make it a lifelong career
- 91% have experienced some form of burnout in ministry and 18% say they are “fried to a crisp right now”

Source: <https://www.soulshpherd.org/pastors-under-stress/>

Benefits of a Sabbatical:

Knowing the negative effects of stress can be the beginning of developing new ways to determine positive stress management techniques. This is essential for all pastors but especially lead pastors. It’s worthwhile to review 5 wonderful benefits that result from creating a sacred space for pastoral Sabbaticals:

- ◆ Congregations develop a greater sense of care for their pastors. There is less dependency on one pastor and more synergy among leaders.
- ◆ Congregations and leaders step up to a new level of unity and leadership. Opportunities for volunteers begin to emerge, and ministry can actually have a greater impact.
- ◆ Sabbaticals demonstrate, in a real way, how much God’s people love their pastors and want to intentionally care for them. It also allows pastors to grow more deeply in their walk with God.
- ◆ Sabbaticals help to empower pastors to become healthy themselves. Every church needs healthy leaders to lead healthy churches.

Planning for the Sabbatical:

Understanding this, there are five areas of consideration church leaders should embrace as they help their pastors and church family prepare for a Sabbatical season.

Time Off: How long should the Sabbatical last? A traditional pastoral sabbatical is normally three months. However, a church may decide a pastor needs a shorter or longer season of reflection and healing. Some churches may choose to give up to 12 months off, while the minimum should be no less than 7 weeks. It’s important to note that this is not a time when a pastor should use his or her vacation. A Sabbatical is a season of renewal.

Sabbatical Structure: Some churches ask a pastor to add an educational component to a Sabbatical. This may be feasible if the break is longer. However, a Sabbatical should not be for the purpose of a study break. Every church should set aside study and planning for their pastors each year, but a Sabbatical is a time for rest. Your pastor should be required to disconnect from ministry completely.

If there is an exception to this mandate, it should be outlined and agreed upon ahead of time. During the Sabbatical a pastor should be asked to rest, read, and create a simple log. This will help him or her give an account to the leadership board about insights gained during this season. It's also a time when pastors should seek God's revelation to share with leaders as a source of encouragement.

Leadership: A Well determined format for leadership decisions and day to day operations should be agreed upon before the pastor takes his or her sabbatical. It's essential that the pastor on Sabbatical feel at release in leaving the ministry, for a season, in capable hands. It is vital that leaders who are fulfilling vacant ministry roles understand that this is a time for stability and not change. Delegated leaders should continue in their pre-Sabbatical roles. The pastor returning from a Sabbatical does not want to encounter problems or issues created by his or her absence. A Sabbatical is a time of unity and prayer for both the absent pastor and the church.

Finances: The Church leadership may want to set aside funds to help offset any expenses incurred by the pastor – travel, lodging, gas, food or any resources that may be helpful in the renewal process. The gift of time and money is a great investment in your pastor. A range of \$2,500-\$5,000 may be a helpful catalyst for discussion depending on how long the pastor will be on Sabbatical. This is a discussion that should be encouraged between the pastor and designated church leaders.

Strategy: The following questions should be considered as a simple but effective strategy for a Sabbatical season.

- Who is the pastor being considered for a Sabbatical, and what is the purpose of the Sabbatical for that pastor?
- What is the length of the Sabbatical and the rationale behind it? How long has the pastor being considered for a Sabbatical been on the church staff and in full-time ministry?
- How will the church leadership help the pastor disconnect during the Sabbatical?
- What are the responsibilities that the pastor will need to delegate, and to whom, while absent from daily ministry needs?
- What should the pastor on Sabbatical do and not do?
- During the Sabbatical, what should staff and leaders do and not do?
- What questions still need to be answered?

Conclusion:

One of the ultimate and most meaningful ways a church can demonstrate their love to a pastor is to provide a Sabbatical of refreshment and reflection. Churches are actually investing in their pastors when they are intentional about empowering pastoral rest. This is a wonderful season for everyone to seek God together for their leaders and for their church, now and in the future. As Paul said in 2 Timothy 4:7 may God's church and his people be able to declare: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."