

General Guidelines for Establishing Sabbatical Policies

What is a Sabbatical?

Ministry is profoundly important, not only to the people directly served but also to the larger community and society. A sabbatical provides time for pastoral staff to step away from the persistent obligations of ministry life to engage in a period of renewal and reflection. Pastoral staff serve a variety of roles in their position at the centre of congregational life: preacher, teacher, spiritual guide, visitor, friend, counselor, strategist, confidant etc. The responsibilities are continual, often with no distinction between “office” and home. The pace and demands can often be relentless, frequently leaving the most dedicated and competent of pastors recognizing the need to replenish their own spiritual, emotional and professional reservoirs to regain energy and capacity for their ministry.

A sabbatical is an extended period of time granted for professional development and/or spiritual renewal away from normal ministerial responsibilities and in a manner that is not possible during the busyness of a typical work year. In the context of the involvement of the Western Canadian District (WCD), sabbaticals are not for continuing formal education. In those cases, please refer to the WCD’s Policy on Continuing Education.

Well planned sabbaticals will also have a side-benefit of enabling leadership within the church to ‘step up to the plate’. As others are afforded opportunity to lead on an interim basis, their leadership skills are developed. Your “bench strength” becomes more robust and the effectiveness of the church increases.

Sabbaticals are not vacations, but carefully planned times for intentional exploration and reflection, for regaining the enthusiasm and creativity for ministry and for discovering what will make the pastors’ heart sing.

Guidelines for planning

From the Church’s perspective:

1. As a church, establish your own sabbatical policy and communicate it to your staff. Samples from large and smaller church contexts are available from the District Office.
2. If needed, contact your District Coach for assistance in setting up a workable policy for your situation.
3. Recommended time periods are 3-4 months after 6-7 years of continual service at your church.
4. It is recommended that for sabbaticals to have their maximum effect, they be taken as a whole and not divided into several parts.

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5. Assign someone from your board to proactively address your sabbatical policy with staff and assist them in planning.
6. Plan for both the financial logistics to support the sabbatical and well as the human resource & communication logistics for the time period when the pastor is away. (*See “Elder Board Sabbatical Planning Checklist”*)
7. Create a clear plan for the pastor’s re-entry into congregational leadership and reporting back to the board the outcomes of his/her sabbatical. (*See “Sabbatical Transitioning Plan”*)

From the Pastor’s perspective:

1. Plan well in advance to propose a sabbatical according to your local church’s policy. If they do not have a policy, discuss your desire/need for a sabbatical with your board. They can access the resources of the District Office through their Coach to establish a policy.
2. Your proposal should contain the following: (*See Pastors Planning Template*)
 - a. A summary statement describing the overall character and purpose of your sabbatical proposal.
 - b. A description of how this will:
 - i. Contribute to your own renewal and development.
 - ii. Contribute to the effectiveness of your congregation/ministry
 - c. On your own, or depending on your church’s policy, in conjunction with others, create a chronological outline of how you will spend your time on the sabbatical. A template is provided for this.
 - d. A plan for assigning ministry responsibility to others while you are on sabbatical.

When a sabbatical is not recommended

1. When significant conflict is present between pastor and the congregation. Time away will not rectify any self-defeating patterns of behaviour that are causing the conflict. Handle the conflict using other resources such as mediators, District Coaches etc.
2. When the timing is detrimental to the congregations’ current context. Do not slavishly adhere to the policy’s schedule for sabbaticals. Rather, talk honestly with each other as to the needs, goals and context of the church to determine the most acceptable time for the pastor to be away.
3. When it creates a serious financial burden to the church. Other paths may be available for assistance such as postponing it for another time so the church can work up to the finances required, or by requesting financial assistance from the District Office.

Before the Sabbatical – General Tips

- Consider strongly the idea of getting away during much or the entire sabbatical. This best provides the context for renewal, rest & reflection

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- Pastors and the board are encouraged to respect the time away the sabbatical offers. If you do or must remain in town, set explicit boundaries with respect to interaction between the pastor and congregation. Communicate this clearly to the board and staff as well as to the congregation.
- Ensure areas of ministry responsibility that need coverage are assigned to staff or lay leaders. This may take a few months to accomplish, so be sure to plan far in advance for your sabbatical.
- Plan ahead so you can leave behind relevant information and resources to staff, volunteers and congregation members who might otherwise call on you.

During the Sabbatical – General Tips

- It will take at least 2 weeks to disconnect from church life mentally and emotionally – bear this in mind as you plan your renewal/development activities.
- Keep a journal before, during and after the sabbatical. This helps you discover what the sabbatical is doing for you and also helps you report back to the board and congregation.
- Remain connected to a peer cohort or other group as may be assigned by the board. A group like this provides spiritual companionship, accountability and nurture during the sabbatical period.
- DO NOT try to do too much.

After the Sabbatical – General Tips

- Together with the board, establish a clear re-entry plan. It is suggested to take 2-3 weeks to re-engage with your full ministry responsibilities. (*See “Sabbatical Transitioning Plan”*)
- Pastors should gauge their emotions and interactions carefully upon their return:
 - Immediate re-establishment and reassertion of your role in the congregation can be experienced negatively by congregants. Perceptions that the pastor is insecure, jealous or needing to reassert “authority” are not uncommon. Others have been leading in your absence. Thank them and gradually transition back to your leadership responsibilities.
 - Be careful not to look for evidence of things that did not go smoothly while you were away!
 - Take time to ask around concerning what happened in the life of the congregation while you were away
 - It is not uncommon for you to feel you can’t easily re-establish a pace or routine. Transitioning back takes time. Give yourself space to readjust.
 - You may come back full of ideas and energy about the next steps, but remember that the rest of the church has not been on the journey you just took, so ease people into your new thoughts so there is a shared vision and sense of partnership in ministry
- Recognize and thank everyone who helped make your sabbatical possible.
- Report on your sabbatical.

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