

Guidelines for Sabbatical Leave | Savannah Presbytery

Introduction to Sabbatical Leave:

Someone has compared the situation of church pastors and educators with that of a taxi leaving an airport - so loaded down with passengers, suitcases and other items that it has a hard time even moving. So it is sometimes for church professionals. They bear the burdens and responsibilities of ministry, the needs, the pain and hurts of their parishioners 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And as a result, many experience, to one degree or another, symptoms of emotional collapse, stress-related illnesses and “burnout” that adversely affect their personal, family and professional life, and that greatly diminish their effectiveness and well-being. For too long, this situation has been tolerated, and even accepted, as an inevitable part of the job.

An effective solution to this situation that affects not only church professionals but the congregations they serve is Sabbath Leave, sometimes referred to as a Sabbatical. This solution has its roots in Scripture and in church tradition.

Sabbatical Leave Defined:

Sabbatical Leave for pastors and church educators is a planned time of intensive enhancement for ministry and mission. Sabbatical Leave follows precedents in the academic community and among a growing number of private sector groups. But even more significantly, it grows out of the Biblical concept of a Sabbath day and a Sabbath year for renewal. It is both an act of faith that God will sustain us through a period of reflection and changed activity and an occasion for recovery and renewal of vital energies.

The “extended time” of Sabbatical Leave is qualitatively different from “vacation” or “days off.” It is, first of all, an opportunity for the church professional to strategically disengage from regular and normal tasks so that ministry and mission may be viewed from a new perspective because of a planned time of focus. But it also is a chance for the congregation and its lay leaders to see and experience things differently. Time apart from their pastors or educators offers church members enriching opportunities for service and growth. A congregation’s capacity for ministry may be strengthened as its members assume greater responsibility for pastoral care ministries, educational activities and congregational administration. Its faith may be deepened and its self-understanding enhanced as it depends on God more consciously. And certainly, when its pastor or educator returns from Sabbatical Leave refreshed in body and spirit, ready to enter a new stage of ministry and eager to explore what everyone has learned, a congregation benefits significantly.

Recommendations:

In the Savannah Presbytery, Sabbatical Leave is recommended for all full-time pastors (in any setting/validated ministry) and church educators who have served in their present position for seven (7) continuous years. The recommended length of a Sabbatical Leave is three (3) months.

In the Savannah Presbytery, Sabbatical Leave is recommended for all part-time pastors (including parish associates) and church educators who have served in their present position for seven (7) continuous years. The recommended length of a Sabbatical Leave is six (6) weeks.

It is acceptable for accrued vacation time and study leave to be attached to a Sabbatical Leave. It is further recommended that provision for Sabbatical Leave be included as a part of a pastor's or educator's terms of call.

Additional Details for Planning for Sabbatical Leave:

In preparing for an anticipated Sabbatical Leave, a Session should appoint – well ahead of time – a planning team to work with its pastor or educator. A general agreement that the Sabbatical Leave will occur should be in place one year ahead of its proposed start date. No fewer than six (6) months before it begins, the team should present for the Session’s approval a detailed written plan of activity for the Sabbatical Leave. Goals to be achieved and expected end-products should be included in the document, along with a personal statement by the pastor or educator as to why the Sabbatical Leave would be valuable for both the pastor or educator and the church. The plan also should include a proposal for how the church’s need for pastoral or educational services would be met during the period of Sabbatical Leave. After the plan is approved by the Session, it should be forwarded to the Presbytery’s Committee on Ministry for its review and counsel as well.

Three (3) months before the start of the Sabbatical Leave, the team should seek to finalize arrangements for the provision of all needed services during the time the pastor or educator is on Leave.

On the day the Sabbatical Leave is to begin, the congregation and pastor or educator should mark the occasion with a helpful rite that includes worship and prayer.

In a similar way, at the conclusion of the Sabbatical, a “bookend” rite should be used to initiate the pastor’s or educator’s re-entry, to mark the resumption of his or her ministry and provide an opportunity for acknowledgment of thanksgiving.

Re-Entry Into Ministry:

Upon re-entry following a time of Sabbatical Leave, the pastor or educator should present both the Session and the Committee on Ministry with a written report, addressing what occurred during the Sabbatical Leave, the learnings it afforded and how he or she would like to capitalize on the experience. After offering its own reflections in turn, the Session and the pastor or educator may seek to develop a plan for addressing what has surfaced.

It certainly would be wise and helpful for the pastor or educator also to share with the entire congregation information about the Sabbatical Leave and to facilitate a conversation on what it brought, both to the pastor or educator and the congregation – new understandings of mission, reaffirmation of calling, reinvigoration for ministry, new capacity for service. Hopefully the congregation will have experienced the Sabbatical as a time of renewal not only for its pastor or educator but also for itself.

Funding:

During a time of Sabbatical Leave, a church should continue to pay the pastor’s or educator’s salary, pension and medical benefits, book allowance and, at the direction of the Session, auto and continuing education allowances at the same level as those in effect at the time of the Sabbatical Leave. In addition, a church may elect to provide other resources to fund and support activities planned for the Sabbatical Leave.

A church may contract with one or more individuals to provide pastoral or educational services during the period of Sabbatical Leave. Commissioned Ruling Elders, retired church professionals,

and sometimes Associate Pastors in the Presbytery may be available to assist in various capacities. However, a church may find that it is able to meet many of its needs through the leadership gifts of its own members.

Clergy, churches, and the Presbytery may wish to set aside funds each year so that resources will be available when a time for Sabbatical Leave arrives. If a church, while wanting to provide its pastor or educator with a time of Sabbatical Leave, believes that it would be financially prohibitive for it to do so, it should consult with the Presbytery. The Board of Pensions also may be of help – it makes Sabbatical stipends available to pastors serving churches with fewer than 200 members.

Though some churches approach Sabbatical Leave as a financial burden to be borne by the congregation, many think of it as an investment they're making – they recognize the long-term benefits their churches will reap from granting Sabbatical Leave. For example, a pastor or educator who has the opportunity to examine and work on issues of professional growth and development while ministering within a particular church is more likely to stay more years in that particular call. The provision of Sabbatical Leave conveys a sense of support and caring on the part of the calling church, and it offers an incentive to both pastors and educators to commit to terms of longer service in a particular church.

Miscellaneous Things to Know or Consider

A very helpful resource: [Clergy Renewal – the Alban Guide to Sabbatical Planning](#)

It may be wise for congregations with multiple staff to limit the number of persons for whom they provide Sabbatical Leave to one per year.

When preparing to provide its pastor or educator a time of Sabbatical Leave, a session would be wise to come to agreement on its view of Sabbatical Leave and its expectations for a Sabbatical. Some consider it an extended time of spiritual rest and renewal, others as time for formal professional training. Expectations for the time should be agreed upon and articulated, especially for the pastor or educator, well in advance of the Sabbatical Leave.

In years leading up to a planned for Sabbatical, church members – and particularly deacons and ruling elders – can be trained and prepared to take on tasks like parish visiting, preaching, teaching and worship leadership.

In a multi-staff church, when one staff member goes on Sabbatical Leave, care should be taken so that a remaining staff member is not given responsibility for doing the work of two persons.

A Suggested Timeline for Sabbatical Leave

Preparation

1. *When Call/Contract is initiated*

- Agreement to provide for a Sabbatical Leave after seven full years of ministry

2. *In years 3-5*

- Activities related to developing funding and resources for the Sabbatical

3. *Between year 5 and 6*

- Agreement by Session on Purpose and Goals for the Sabbatical Leave and Formation of Planning Team

4. *12 months before proposed start of Sabbatical Leave*

- Effort by the Planning Team to develop a Proposed Plan of Sabbatical Leave Activities for both the church professional and the church

5. *6 months before proposed start of Sabbatical Leave*

- Approval of the Proposed Plan of Sabbatical Leave Activities by the Session and Sharing of Purpose, Goals and Plan of Activities with Committee on Ministry for its counsel

6. *3 months before proposed start of Sabbatical Leave*

- Finalizing of arrangements ensuring that all responsibilities will be covered

7. *On Sunday immediately before the Sabbatical Leave begins*

- A Rite for Beginning a Time of Sabbatical Leave

The Experience

Activities of the Congregation

Activities of the pastor or educator

Review and Follow Up

A Rite for Concluding a Time of Sabbatical Leave

Reports to the Session and congregation

Sharing of report with the Committee on Ministry

Beginning of Planning for Follow Up Activities and Next Sabbatical

Sabbatical Leave for Pastors and Educators: FAQ's

Why do we need Sabbatical Leave guidelines?

Terms of Call for an increasing number of pastor and educators in the Savannah Presbytery contain clauses providing for Sabbatical Leave. The guidelines can help churches approach the possibility with greater consistency. It is the recommendation of the Presbytery that its full-time pastors and educators be provided three months of Sabbatical Leave after seven years of service.

Is the provision of Sabbatical Leave mandatory?

The provision of Sabbatical Leave is not required, but it is recommended. Increasingly, the terms of call and employment of church professionals are including some provision for Sabbatical Leave. And more and more frequently Pastor Nominating Committees are using it as part of their strategy for recruiting the best candidates.

Why do pastors and educators need Sabbatical Leave?

The stress and pressure faced by church professionals is well documented. The time offered as Sabbatical Leave is not the same as “vacation” where one does not completely disengage from the parish. Sabbatical Leave provides the type of time and space required for spiritual renewal and healing.

How are we going to pay for this?

With forethought and creativity, churches can find ways to fund Sabbatical Leave for their pastors and educators while ensuring that their congregational leadership needs also are met. What's crucial is planning and preparing well ahead of time. A reasonable amount of money, set aside annually, can add up to enough to fund a Sabbatical once every seven years. Also, from various sources, grants and stipends may be secured.

How will the guidelines affect smaller churches?

We believe that smaller membership churches can benefit immensely from providing Sabbatical Leave for their leaders. We covenant to work with these congregations, to help them meet their leadership needs.

So what will my church “get” out of this?

Sabbaticals are meant to increase productive, long-term pastorates, which in turn may strengthen congregations and their ministries. Plus, it only makes sense that church professionals, who have been reinvigorated for ministry, are going to be more effective!