

**THE COMMITTEE ON MINISTRY OF
THE PRESBYTERY OF WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA
POLICY CONCERNING SABBATICALS**

Rationale

The work of ministry is varied and complex, often stretching a work week to sixty or seventy hours. There must be time for preparation for teaching and preaching. Then there are pastoral duties which place him/her on twenty-four hour call. Sometimes, like riding an emotional roller coaster, the minister will be rejoicing with those who rejoice one hour and the next weeping with those who weep. There are counseling demands, administrative responsibilities, calls for participation in the work of Presbytery, and the expected involvement in local community ministries and concerns. Our ministers are expected to be competent and effective in all these areas.

As a result, many, if not all, go through various stages of stress related illnesses and “burnout” which adversely affects his/her personal, family and parish life. For too long, this situation has been accepted as an inevitable part of the calling.

The time has come for us to consider a viable option to help relieve some of the peculiar stress and strains which the clergy encounter. We find its roots both in Scripture and in church tradition. It is called Sabbath Leave, sometimes referred to as a Sabbatical.

Explanation of Sabbath Leave

A Sabbath Leave is a period of time provided for the clergy to disengage from their regular tasks and from the stress of being constantly on call. It has its antecedents in the Biblical concept of the Sabbath day and Sabbath year. It is a time for rest, reflection and re-creation; a time for personal spiritual growth; an opportunity for renewed vision and commitment to ministry. It is also an opportunity for the congregation to reflect on the whole nature and meaning of ministry and the place of that congregation in that mission. The Sabbath Leave, with its emphasis on rest, travel, study and reflection, is different from other times away for such pursuits, advanced degree work or career assessment.

Scripture abounds with illustrations of God's leaders spending significant time in solitude and reflection in preparation for and continuation of ministry. Our Lord Jesus went away into the wilderness for forty days and nights to commune with God and prepare Himself for ministry. He took time by Himself on the mountain or out in a boat. Exodus 23 and Leviticus 25 speak of Sabbath days and Sabbath land years when the ground is untilled so that it can replenish itself. A Sabbath Leave is a time to refill and replenish the soul, to be refreshed in the spirit with renewed dedication and vision, all of which can bring great benefits in a renewed, more fulfilling and productive ministry.

Eligibility

The period of service providing eligibility may vary according to the number of years ordained, the amount of time since the last Sabbath Leave or other considerations. The period being recommended would ordinarily come during

the seventh year of ministry in one place. There would be an eight week leave which could be extended to twelve weeks if the vacation were included. Individual churches and clergy could negotiate for a longer period, depending on the nature of the Sabbath leave. Sabbath leave would take the place of the two week study leave that year.

Pastors who contemplate seeking another call should not normally participate in a Sabbath leave.

Cost

The cost of the leave will ordinarily be assumed by the clergy, who will continue to receive full salary and benefits during this time. Congregations may want to take a special offering to help defray expenses for travel and study. The costs for supply clergy or other expenses incurred by the congregation or governing body as a result of the leave will be paid by the congregation or governing body served. Those congregations who would have financial problems in providing these costs could consult with Presbytery.

Planning for the Sabbath Leave

It is wise to engage the Session and congregation or, in the case of ordained Presbytery staff, the Presbytery, in understanding the rationale for the leave and in planning for the same. Such issues as purposes of the leave, interim arrangements, division of responsibilities in clergy absence, and planning for re-entry when leave is completed should be discussed and decided.

Upon re-entry, a written report should be made to the Session, or appropriate governing body, sharing details of the leave, as well as reflections on its value and benefit. The Session might also share some of the benefits the congregation has gained during this time, such as discovering new lay leadership or new understanding of the concept of mission as shared between clergy and congregation.

The ideal result would be for the congregation to see this period of time not just as the clergy's Sabbath Leave, but as the congregation's Sabbath Leave also.

A very helpful resource on this subject is *Sabbatical Planning* by Richard Bullock. It may be ordered from the Alban Institute, Inc., 4125 Nebraska Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20016.