



Sabbatical Leave Guidelines for Sessions and Congregations

Introduction

In today's fast pace "I want it now" society, installed and commissioned pastors and other valued professional church staff as well as congregations and Sessions share in the challenges of an ever-changing society. For our churches to grow and thrive, all involved must be sensitive to each other's needs and prepare in advance to nurture one another.

On a daily basis installed and commissioned pastors and other church professionals are engaging and addressing needs within the congregation and the community. In one moment, they may be riding the euphoric high of celebration only to be humbled in the next by coping with devastating despair. They are asked to excel in counseling, planning, administration, staff and volunteer leadership, finance, guidance and compassion, along with the planning and leadership of regular and special services.

Local congregations and their leadership also face pressures accompanying daily living. They too may ride a euphoric high in one moment and face devastating despair in the next. Moving from one stage to another depends on insight, commitment and preparation.

Therefore, planning for a Sabbatical Leave can be a source of renewal for pastors and other professional staff as well as congregations. It can provide an effective, supportive plan for the overall ministry of the church while melding together the resources and love of the congregation to and for the needs of pastors and other professional staff.

Biblical Foundation

Sabbatical Leave has its antecedents in the Biblical concept of the Sabbath day and Sabbath year. Scripture abounds with illustrations of God's leaders (Moses, Elijah, Paul, John the Baptist, etc.) spending significant time in solitude and reflection in preparation for and continuation of ministry. Our Lord Jesus went into the wilderness for 40 days and nights to commune with God and prepare for ministry. He took time away on the mountain and out in the boat. He provided an example, a model for an experience whose time has come.

Exodus 23 and Leviticus 25 speak of Sabbath days and years and Sabbath land years when the ground is untilled so that it can replenish itself. It is a time to refill and replenish the soul, to be refreshed in the Spirit with renewed dedication and vision, restored in physical health and energy, all of which can bring renewed and more fulfilling and productive ministry.*

* Portions extracted from the "Sabbatical Leave Policy" for the Presbytery of Charlotte

Definition

Sabbatical Leave is best thought of as a partnership between the installed and commissioned pastors and other valued professional staff and the congregation. For these valued church professionals, this time is intended to be qualitatively different from an academic sabbatical, study leave, or vacation. The Sabbatical Leave frees them from the ongoing pressures of deadlines, pastoral duties, and being constantly on call, and replaces that with a plan that encourages rest, travel, study, conversation, and reflection while allowing for the possibility of seizing the moment when opportunities not planned present themselves. The intended result is that a renewed and refreshed staff member would bring new energy and insight to the life of the congregation.

The Sabbatical Leave is also for the congregation, offering an opportunity to invite a new voice into the pulpit or to explore a new program. The Session may discern, along with the staff member, that the church could benefit from taking a step back from some programs and activities or experience a different form of worship. In addition, the Session may discern that the sabbatical time is an opportunity to explore a particular topic, like stewardship, leadership development, or a current issue impacting the church and community.

Process

Each Session in the PWNC is encouraged to enact a policy for Sabbatical Leave that fits its unique situation and context. In developing a congregation's policy, the Session should identify positions that are eligible for leave, a planning timeline, the length of leave, funding for the leave and for the ongoing ministry of the church, need for pastoral coverage and other congregational leadership during the leave, and reporting upon return from leave. As the Session represents both the voice and desires of the congregation, it is prudent to make the congregation aware of the developing policy, seeking their input, encouragement and prayers. Presbytery's Committee on Ministry is available to help with process as needed.

Sabbatical Leave is typically offered to installed and commissioned pastors and other professional staff. However, it is not uncommon to extend the same considerations to other church staff who have dedicated long service to their church and are vital to the overall ministry being provided. These guidelines are also intended to be useful in other settings where professionals are not serving with a congregation, such as validated ministries or presbytery positions.

It is recommended that a Sabbatical Leave be granted after 6 years of continuous service in a position. However, in extraordinary circumstances (see Guidelines for Sessions below), a session may grant a period of Sabbatical Time earlier for rest, renewal and recovery.

The Sabbatical Leave policy may allow for the utilization of vacation and continuing education leaves to be added to the time away from the church. However, prayerful consideration is advised if the proposed combination of Sabbatical leave and vacation/continuing education leaves exceeds 12 weeks.

More specific guidance in developing and implementing a Sabbatical policy follows:

- Sabbatical Planning for Sessions
- Sabbatical Planning for Staff
- Sabbatical Planning for Presbytery

Planning for Sessions

Overview

Both the authority and responsibility for establishing a Sabbatical Leave policy rests with the Session. Upon establishment of the policy, the Session and the eligible staff member will collaborate in planning and implementing the leave. The impact of Sabbatical time is clearly maximized by thoughtful and focused pre-planning between the leader and session.

Guidelines

When creating a Sabbatical Leave policy, it is important for the session to have guidelines which reflect the intent of the policy for the staff member and the congregation. In thinking about a Sabbatical Leave, the Session is encouraged to consider the following guidelines:

- A Sabbatical is not extended vacation time.
- The policy is most effective if it encourages the Sabbatical Leave a time of renewal and commitment with elements of travel, rest, relaxation, exploration, and learning.
- Eligible staff may take up to 8 weeks of Sabbatical after 6 years of continuous service, unless otherwise stated in an employee contract.

Leave from the church may be up to 14 weeks if all vacation leave and continuing education leave are included and approved by Session. Sabbatical time would take the place of the 2-week study leave for the eligible staff member for that year.

- A Sabbatical is not extended vacation time.
- Following special circumstances, the Session may choose to grant a Sabbatical time for renewal and recovery. (See comment about timing in Process discussion above.) These circumstances may include:
 - Nature-related circumstances (i.e., hurricanes, floods, tornados, etc.)
 - Human-related circumstances (i.e., epidemic/pandemic, acts of violence, community economic recession, closing of a significant source of employment in the community)
 - Special church-related circumstances (i.e., long-term building project, large or multiple traumas, or other challenging times in the life of the church).
- If more than one staff member becomes eligible for a Sabbatical Leave in the same year, precedence will be given to the staff member with the longest tenure since date of employment with the church.

Planning Process

The steps in planning a Sabbatical Leave may include:

- Receiving the staff member's request for a Sabbatical Leave one year in advance and approval of the plan approximately 6 months in advance of commencement.
- Continuing all terms of call commitments to the staff member during Sabbatical Leave.
- Ensuring the budget includes funding to cover the additional expenses of temporary leadership.
- Meeting with the eligible staff member to discuss possible changing roles and responsibilities during Sabbatical Leave.
- Making sure all necessary responsibilities are covered while the staff member is on Sabbatical.
- Communicating to the congregation the importance and value to the church of a Sabbatical.
- Receiving and reviewing, within 3 months of the Sabbatical completion, a written report that includes the details of the Sabbatical Leave as well as reflections of the value and benefit.

- Allowing, if requested, ordained staff to extend the Sabbatical Leave by adding on vacation and continuing education time after consultation with and approval from the Personnel Committee and Session.

Funding

- In most cases, the cost of the Sabbatical Leave will be assumed by the staff member. To assist in budgeting for a Sabbatical, the staff member is encouraged to create a savings plan for future use during the Sabbatical. The church may also contribute funds for this purpose as able.
- The staff member will continue to receive all existing forms of compensation (salary, and when applicable pension/major medical benefits and at the direction of the Session, auto, professional and continuing education allowances at the same level as those in effect at the time of the Sabbatical).
- Some continuing education and professional allowances for the year of a Sabbatical may be used toward the Sabbatical or, with Session approval, continuing education and professional funds from the year prior may be saved and used. This request should be included by the staff member in the plan for the Sabbatical.
- The Session and appropriate committees will work with the staff member to consider any funding of activities undertaken during the Sabbatical where results will be directly beneficial to the church. The church is encouraged to set aside funds annually in anticipation of future Sabbatical requests.
- The costs for the pulpit supply or other expenses incurred by the congregation during the Sabbatical Leave will be paid by the church.

Planning for Staff

Guidelines

- When considering a Sabbatical Leave, the staff member is encouraged to open a conversation with the Session approximately 18 months in advance.
- A formal request to the Session should be made at least one year in advance to allow time for planning.
- At least 6 months prior to the proposed beginning of the Sabbatical Leave, more specific plans for the Sabbatical Leave should be shared with the Session.
- Upon approval, the staff member will collaborate with the Session to assure that all necessary responsibilities are covered in the staff member's absence.
- Upon re-entry, the staff member will share with the Session and congregation the details of the Sabbatical Leave as well as reflections on its value and benefit.
- Under normal circumstances, the staff member would continue serving the congregation for a period of at least one year. A staff member should not undertake a sabbatical if continuing at least a year following the sabbatical time is not intended.

Funding

See points listed above under Sabbatical Planning for Sessions.

Planning for Presbytery

Overview

The Presbytery of Western North Carolina has a critical role to play in the Sabbatical process. The PWNC understands the pressures placed on ministers and other staff as well as congregations and is committed to supporting the health and vitality of churches and church leaders within our geographical boundaries. The Presbytery encourages its congregations to adopt a Sabbatical plan for their staff and is available to advise and support as needed. The most efficient oversight of this role is properly channeled through the Committee on Ministry, who already has responsibility for the health and vitality of congregations.

Considerations for Presbytery

- Aid in interpreting the reason for the Sabbatical Leave, supporting both the minister and the Session during the preparation period as well as the Sabbatical period.
- Receive for approval the terms of call or changes in the terms of call, including Sabbatical Leave.
- Determine and approve who will moderate the Session in a minister's absence.
- Serve as a mediator in any concerns relative to the Sabbatical Leave.
- Be available to the minister and Session in discerning the plan for the congregation and the strategy for leadership during the Sabbatical Leave.
- Receive the Sabbatical Leave report from staff member after it has been presented to Session upon re-entry to ministry.
- Develop and maintain a list of ministers willing to provide service to the congregation during the Sabbatical time, an invaluable tool for budget-strained churches in the Presbytery.

Approved by Committee on Ministry
Presbytery of Western North Carolina
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