

SABBATICAL GUIDELINES AND RESOURCES FOR PROFESSIONAL CHURCH WORKERS

Southeastern District, LCMS

The Southeastern District -- LCMS, in its 1994 Convention affirmed a set of guidelines, presented by the Board For Professional Care Services, to assist congregations and schools in developing their own sabbatical policies. These guidelines include the following ingredients: (1) for full-time professional church workers, (2) after 4-7 years in a particular ministry, (3) for a duration of three consecutive months, (4) a plan prepared by the professional church worker in consultation with the congregation, (5) pastoral care coverage during the sabbatical, (6) a report following the sabbatical, and (7) the payment of salary and all benefits.

In addition, the Southeastern District Board of Directors on October 26, 1996, passed a sabbatical policy for SED executive staff, which grants a three-month sabbatical after seven years of continuous service. The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod at its 2001 National Convention passed a resolution encouraging congregations to fund sabbaticals for its pastors.

The word "sabbatical" is derived from "Sabbath." Sabbath time is based on Genesis 2:1-4a in which God modeled and later required (Exodus 17:8-11) the setting aside of 1/7th of our time for re"creation" and restoration. For ancient Israel, Sabbath-keeping was a spiritual discipline that was designed to develop the Israelites' ability to trust God. A person who kept the Sabbath exercised trust in God by abstaining from those activities that provided material resources. For one day each week, the Israelites would entrust themselves to God's care rather than to their own ability to work. In short, Sabbath-keeping is a discipline of abstinence from those activities that make us more self-sufficient than God-sufficient.

Historically, in church and academia, the professionals were given a sabbatical every seventh year. The observation was that academic professors and clergy were so worn out after seven years of teaching and leading that they needed a time of rest, recovery, renewal, and re-education in their field of endeavor. The assumptions were that it paid off for the professional person (avoiding breakdown) and that it paid off for the institution (re-energized and updated leadership). Professional church workers (i.e. Pastor, Deaconess, Director of Christian Education, School Administrator, etc.) need to recreate and restore what has been worn down by day-to-day encounters with stresses and strains of everyday life and ministry.

Nourishing one's soul and regaining perspective requires a change of pace and place --- a pilgrimage. Jesus provides us a good example to follow. He was always moving toward his Father -- in prayer, in his teaching, in his travel and then toward the people in care and concern. And the apostles who walked with him were renewed day by day. That's what sabbatical is about -- a pilgrimage with Jesus toward our Heavenly Father.

Sabbatical typically includes time for travel, rest, prayer, and experiencing different cultures. The best sabbaticals are more open-ended than rigid, allowing for the surprises, and possible new direction, that may come. Jesus' forty days in the wilderness marked a turning point in his ministry. Moses' time spent tending sheep helped change his perspective on his calling and life. David tended sheep and learned valuable lessons about God's care and provision. Paul, struck down on the road to Damascus, disappeared into the desert of Arabia for three years, and emerged with a new vision. Therefore, sabbatical is a time to receive, to be nurtured, and to reflect on your relationship with God and your own story, so that you can be renewed, refreshed, and revitalized for a life of service to others.

VALUES AND ASSUMPTIONS

- 1) Encouraging professional church workers to maintain good self-care benefits the worker, the congregation, and the church at large.
- 2) When there is a good match between the professional church worker and congregation or school, a long-term ministry is desirable. In such instances, a sabbatical is wise investment.
- 3) Good self-care, which may include a sabbatical, enables the professional church worker to achieve a new sense of vision, renew his/her calling, evaluate his/her gifts and skills and the needs of the ministry.
- 4) The sabbatical time can open up new opportunities for members to grow in service and thereby be a blessing for the congregation.
- 5) Sabbatical leave should be an ongoing intentional part of a congregation's ministry, not a reaction to a crisis. (i.e. burnout) An excellent time to incorporate a sabbatical policy is during the call process.
- 6) Sabbaticals are a way that congregations can minister to their professional workers.

BENEFITS OF SABBATICALS

A. For your congregation

- 1) An experienced professional church worker who returns from sabbatical with renewed energy and rediscovered zeal for ministry
- 2) An opportunity to develop congregational leadership and to come to a greater understanding of the congregation's ministry by assuming some of the pastoral duties during the interim
- 3) An occasion for the congregation to reflect and assess their partnership with the professional church worker and ways to strengthen and improve ministry
- 4) An opportunity to show support and care for a professional church worker and his family
- 5) A time for congregational members to reconsider their commitment and to assess their relationship to the life and witness of the congregation
- 6) Cost effective. When an experienced church worker takes a call and leaves, the congregation loses finances due to loss of momentum, expenses of interim church workers, potential loss of members during an interim period, cost of moving expenses of a new work, lost efficiency while new relationships develop, etc.

B. For the professional church worker

- 1) A needed break from long hours, high pressure, personal sacrifice, and the 24/7 nature of ministry
- 2) A time for prayer, rest, study, decision making, and travel
- 3) A change of scenery and place which can help prevent burnout
- 4) An opportunity for the worker to discover the importance of doing what they do because of who they ARE rather than because of what they DO
- 5) The opportunity to develop greater self-awareness and spiritual depth
- 6) A time with family and friends, to renew and strengthen those relationships

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPING A SABBATICAL POLICY

A. Determine The Time Parameters

- 1) When? Timing is crucial so as to minimize disruption to the congregation. Plan long in advance to prepare the congregation for a smooth transition. The professional church worker and congregation will need about a year to plan the sabbatical. Many sabbaticals are scheduled for the summer months, which is traditionally a "down time" for the congregation.

- 2) How long?
 - The Southeastern District recommends 3 months + vacation time (not in place of) every 7 years.
 - Clarify and distinguish "vacation" and "sabbatical" (A sabbatical is not simply a reward or vacation, but an important part of the working relationship between pastor and congregation.)

B. Determine Financial Arrangements

- 1) A continuation of full salary and benefits during sabbatical (except possibility the car allowance) is advisable.
- 2) How will this be financed? Some options might include:
 - Entirely financed by the congregation where this is possible. This could be provided for in the annual budget or through special gifts.
 - The congregation and professional church worker each contributing 3% of salary and housing to a sabbatical fund each year. After 7 years, the professional church worker would be able to take a leave of three months, plus vacation, with pay. The funds accrued, plus interest, minus Concordia Plans expenses would be paid to the professional worker over the period of the sabbatical.
 - Retired professional church workers may be willing to contribute one or more sabbatical periods to make it possible for congregations with limited resources to provide a sabbatical.
 - Alternate financing may be available, depending on the nature of the sabbatical (e.g. Wheat Ridge, Thrivent, Louisville Institute, Lilly Foundation grants)
- 3) What about costs for pastoral care? (e.g. supply preaching, pastoral assistance)
- 4) Will the congregation assist with tuition and travel costs, where it is feasible?

C. Make Specific Sabbatical Plans

- 1) Design
 - Sabbaticals are very individual. There needs to be mutual agreement by the professional church worker and congregation on the sabbatical plan. It is useful to have a "mentor" (one who has done it) help develop the plan. Will the sabbatical be programmed or open-ended -- for the purposes of spiritual growth? theological reflection? creative expression? pastoral concerns? justice issues? travel? It is helpful for the worker to present a written proposal to the Sabbatical Committee. This proposal may include a listing of desired outcomes, a description of activities planned during the sabbatical, a summary of travel plans, and a listing of church tasks and responsibilities to be cared for in his/her absence.
 - Options for a sabbatical might include: encounters with other cultures and with Christian communities in other countries, research or writing on independent projects or as part of a formal seminar or academic program, theological reflection and spiritual renewal, family time, decision making time, creative expression (e.g. art, music), recreation and rest
- 2) Purpose
 - What does the professional church worker want (dream, hope) to happen to himself/herself personally? How would he like the congregation and his/her family to benefit?
 - A sabbatical is a time to NOT DO what you normally do. (e.g. do not preach, teach, do normal preparation for ministry, "set foot on the church property", etc.)

3) Physical setting

- Settings create the atmosphere for a sabbatical.
- This could be a retreat center, foreign travel, home, university or seminary campus, an overseas mission field, a conference of interest, etc.
- Boundaries are important and need to be established in writing and agreed upon - For example: a complete absence from the congregation, even when the worker is in town.

4) Other Considerations

- The congregation should appoint a Sabbatical Committee (5 members, which would include the President and Elder Chairperson) to assist both the professional church worker and congregation in planning the sabbatical.
- Recognize that it may take at least a year of education to help the congregation understand the value of the sabbatical the first time they offer it. It is helpful to gain the congregation's ownership and support.
- Clarify sabbatical benefits to professional church worker and congregation. A good sabbatical meets a mutual need. What does the worker want to happen to himself/herself personally? How would he/she like the congregation to benefit? What can be special for his/her spouse, children, and friends?
- What is the congregation's plan for pastoral care and public worship during sabbatical? What responsibilities need to continue and how will they be taken care of? It is important to establish clear procedures about how and under what circumstances the church worker would want to be contacted (if at all).
- Are there any restrictions being placed on the professional church worker following the sabbatical? (e.g. must remain for at least 1 year following sabbatical)
- It is helpful to assign one person to keep a daily log of parish happenings during the time of the sabbatical so that the worker can be quickly brought up to date on all the significant events that took place during his/her absence and be able to resume his/her duties in stride.

5) Following The Sabbatical

- A "Reentry Plan" is important. Expect some "anger" from members and staff, as well as to feel disconnected and out of touch. Both the worker and congregation are in a different place following the sabbatical. It is helpful to "re-negotiate" roles and expectations as a part of the reentry process.
- Submit a written and/or oral report to the congregation. This is a time for debriefing and reconnecting. It is also useful for the worker to establish a blog – journal, take pictures, etc. – to share the sabbatical with the congregation in real time.

SAMPLE SABBATICAL POLICY

A sabbatical is intended for the mutual benefit and growth of both the worker and the congregation/school. The timing for the sabbatical is an important consideration and must be determined in the light of and be compatible with the congregation's present needs and programming. Therefore, the exact timing and its funding must be approved by _____ (e.g. Church Council).

After a period of _____ years of full-time ministry at _____ Lutheran Church, called workers shall be eligible for a 3-month sabbatical. (vacation time would be in addition to this)

The church worker should begin the request process a year in advance of the sabbatical to allow adequate time for educating the congregation and planning the time away. A written proposal should be developed, which would include expectations, the focus of the sabbatical, presumed benefits for and impacts upon one's work in ministry, and a detailing of the work being left behind.

Financial support of the church worker by the congregation during the sabbatical will include full salary and benefits. Additional costs (e.g. Sunday worship, hospital calls, etc.) will be covered by _____ (e.g. grant, a special fund or budget line item established for this purpose).

During the sabbatical year no other continuing education time will be provided the church worker.

The President of the congregation will appoint a Sabbatical Committee to assist the church worker and the congregation in planning for the sabbatical. The Committee will: coordinate and insure that the responsibilities left behind by the church worker will be attended to, help the church worker develop his/her sabbatical plan, bring the church worker up to date upon his/her return. This Committee will have at least five members, which will include the President and Chair of the Board of Elders.

The church worker will report to the congregation after his/her sabbatical.

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