

PRESBYTERY OF GENESEE VALLEY

Sabbatical Leave Policy

POLICY STATEMENT

The Presbytery of Genesee Valley recommends to the sessions of its churches that Pastors be granted, upon request, a compensated Sabbatical Leave of at least three (3) months after six (6) years of service to an individual church. Upon returning to the church from the Sabbatical Leave, the Pastor will be restored to his/her former position and status and shall receive salary as per their terms of call and she/he will remain in their position for at least one (1) year or otherwise forfeit the salary provided during the period of the Sabbatical Leave.

RATIONALE

Often on completion of years of ministry and service, pastors need time to refocus their vision, update professional skills and find renewal of their sense of call. During their period of ministry and service, pastors endure many of the burdens, the anguish, the pain, hurts and emotional strain of their parishioners. As a result, many experience symptoms of emotional collapse, stress related illnesses and “burnout,” all of which diminish their effectiveness and jeopardize their well being. A Sabbatical Leave offers an opportunity for a change-of-pace.

A Sabbatical Leave is a planned time of renewal by which a pastor seeks personal and professional growth. A Sabbatical Leave may include continuing education, spiritual formation, mentoring with respected leaders, and personal refreshment. It is an opportunity for an individual to disengage from regular and routine tasks so that their ministry may be viewed from a new perspective.

A Sabbatical Leave is an extension of the biblical concept of the Sabbath Day of renewal. It is both an act of faith that God will sustain us through a period of reflection and an occasion for the renewal of vital energies. Just as the Sabbath Day is a gift from God during a busy week, so the gift of a Sabbatical Leave can offer refreshment and rejuvenation for those who labor continuously for God’s people. The goal of the Sabbatical Leave is to allow the pastor to return to the responsibilities of the congregation with renewed energy, spiritual vision, and effectiveness. Pastors who have the opportunity to reflect on issues of professional growth and development are more likely to stay more years in a particular call.

A Sabbatical Leave is best defined by considering what it is not. A Sabbatical Leave is not a vacation. While a sabbatical is a time of rest and renewal, it is not vacation. A Sabbatical Leave is qualitatively different from “time off” or “vacation” in that there is a plan for personal and professional renewal. Proper sabbaticals involve a plan, a goal, and accountability. A Sabbatical Leave should not, however, be so tightly structured that the Spirit has no freedom to lead and reveal. The plan should have built-in flexibility. Neither vacation nor continuing education/study leave should be affected by a Sabbatical Leave. However, accrued vacation or continuing education/study leave may be taken in conjunction with the Sabbatical Leave, adding no more than four additional weeks to the Sabbatical Leave.

A Sabbatical Leave is not an academic leave. Earning advanced degrees is a commendable goal, and every pastor should be committed to life-long learning. But theological education is, for many, stressful work and not always conducive to renewal and visioning. Some may be renewed by academic work, others not. Churches must recognize that academic work should not be an expectation of their pastor’s sabbatical.

A Sabbatical Leave is not an escape. If there is significant conflict in a congregation, it should be worked through in the pastor’s presence, not his or her absence. A Sabbatical Leave should never be used to escape difficulties, nor is it ever a time for the pastor to seek a new call.

For the congregation, a Sabbatical Leave can allow the people to re-establish their corporate memory. Without the normal relationships and reliances that a pastorate can create, the congregation recovers their own sense of ministry to the church and to each other. The Sabbatical Leave should be an opportunity to identify new patterns that can strengthen the church.

You may ask, are Sabbatical leaves really needed? The subject of Sabbatical leave for pastors is often met with a chorus of questions. High on the list is some form of: “Why should the pastor have a Sabbatical? I don’t get one in my profession, nor do any of the people I work with. The business world is tough, too!” While the concept of the Sabbatical has long been recognized in the academic community, the church has been a bit slower to recognize its value. “Are they really necessary?” Let’s address that question from a biblical and practical perspective.

The Biblical Sabbath The Scripture contains numerous references to the Sabbath, not only as a day set aside as holy to the Lord, but as a basic rhythm of life for God’s covenanted people. Consider the following:

“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.” (Exodus 20:8-11)

“Six days shall work be done; but the seventh day is a Sabbath of complete rest, a holy convocation; you shall do no work: it is a Sabbath to the LORD throughout your settlements.” (Leviticus 23:3)

“Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest for the land, a Sabbath for the LORD: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the after-growth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your un-pruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land.” (Leviticus 25:3-5)

“And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family.” (Lev. 25:10)

The Hebrew word **shabbat** literally means to “cease” or “stop.” Scripture shows us a God-ordained rhythm of work and rest, both for a short-term cycle (weekly) and an extended cycle (the year of Jubilee).

In the New Testament there are two important examples of this rhythm (although we don’t usually see them in this light). Just before initiating his public ministry, Jesus spent forty days alone to fast and pray (Matt. 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13). The Apostle Paul, following his conversion, spent time in obscurity in his home area before Barnabas sought him out for his life’s vocation (Acts 11:25).

While neither of these New Testament examples could be called a “Sabbatical” in the contemporary sense, they illustrate an important principal: an investment in reflection and spiritual renewal only serves to enhance a servant of Christ’s ministry. If in the contemporary church we are truly interested in growing God’s Kingdom, and not just hours clocked in, we would do well to consider these examples.

The Practical Sabbath: In his book Support Your Local Pastor, Wes Roberts quotes from a revealing survey of pastors conducted by Dr. Arch Hart of Fuller Theological Seminary in 1991. It reported the following:

- 90% of pastors work more than 46 hours per week, and often more than 60.

- 80% believe that pastoral ministry has had a negative effect on their family.
- 33% agreed, “Being in ministry is clearly a hazard to my family.
- 75% have reported a significant crisis due to stress at least once every five years in their ministry.
- 50% feel unable to meet the needs of their job.
- 90% feel they were not adequately trained to cope with the ministry demands placed upon them.
- 40% reported having serious conflict with a parishioner at least once a month.
- 37% have been involved in inappropriate sexual behavior with someone in the church.
- 70% report lower self-esteem after they have served as a pastor than before they started.

Finally, what really makes the pressures of pastoral ministry unique today is the lack of time and opportunity to relieve the building stress. In today’s economic reality, many pastor’s spouses also work full-time jobs. Pastors, by the nature of their work, must work weekends. This means limited weekend time with spouse and/or family. A Presbyterian pastor with a spouse who works Monday through Friday gets only four uninterrupted weekends with their spouse each year. Also, the weekly “day off” is often interrupted by pastoral emergencies.

PLANNING FOR A SABBATICAL LEAVE

To be eligible for a Sabbatical Leave, the Pastor shall present, in writing, to the Session for its approval, a program (“the Plan”) of activity for the Sabbatical Leave, ordinarily at least six (6) months prior to the proposed beginning of the Sabbatical Leave. This program of activity and meditation shall provide a general description of the Plan, the goals to be achieved, and the expected outcomes, if possible, together with a personal statement as to why this Sabbatical Leave would be valuable for both the Pastor and the Congregation.

Upon approval by the Session prior to the Sabbatical leave, the Plan shall be forwarded to the Presbytery’s Committee on Ministry for its information along with the Session’s plan for pastoral services during the period of the Sabbatical Leave.

At the completion of the Sabbatical Leave, the pastor should present in a timely fashion a written report on the Sabbatical Leave to the Session.

FUNDING

Clergy and churches are encouraged to set aside funds each year so that resources will be available during the time of Sabbatical Leave. The employing church will be responsible to continue to pay all the items of the terms of call of the Pastor during the Sabbatical Leave period. The employing church will also contract for substitute pastor services during the period of the Sabbatical Leave. Although, on the face of it, the Sabbatical Leave may seem like another financial burden for the local congregation to bear, it is crucial for the Session and the Congregation to recognize the long term benefits they, as a church, will reap from granting the Sabbatical Leave.

Those churches that would have financial difficulty in providing the Sabbatical Leave should consult with the Presbytery’s Committee on Ministry to seek possible financial resources to grant such a leave. In addition, those churches who could not secure lay leadership within their own congregations, might consider using lay leaders of other congregations or Commissioned Ruling Elders of the Presbytery who might be willing to preach or may conduct pastoral care.

UPON RE-ENTRY

Upon re-entry, it is strongly suggested that the Pastor share with the entire congregation the details of the Sabbatical Leave as well as reflections on its value and benefit. The re-entry process provides a great

opportunity to reflect upon the benefits that resulted from the Sabbatical Leave. Such expected benefits are:

- discovering the strength of lay leadership heretofore under-utilized
- new understandings of the concept of mission as shared mission between pastor and congregation
- reaffirmation of calling to ministry on the part of the pastor and congregation with both reinvigorated and rededicated to the work of the Kingdom of God

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

RESPONSIBILITIES

Pastor Responsibilities

1. Bring the sabbatical proposal before the session - at least in outline form - a minimum of six months, or far enough in advance to be covered by the church's budget and staffing plans, before the intended commencement of the sabbatical.
2. Secure the approval of the session for the sabbatical proposal and work out the necessary coverage of pastoral and pulpit responsibilities.
3. Assure the session of continued service to the church for at least twelve months from the conclusion of the sabbatical.
4. Bring up to date all pending responsibilities as determined in consultation with the session before departing on a sabbatical.
5. Submit to the Committee on Ministry, in writing, the sabbatical timetable and outline of plans.
6. Upon return, present an overview of the sabbatical experience to the session, congregation and the Committee on Ministry.

Session Responsibilities

1. Receive for approval the pastor's proposal for a sabbatical, at least six (6) months in advance of the intended commencement of the sabbatical.
2. Continue terms of call commitments to the pastor during sabbatical leave.
3. Communicate to the congregation the importance and value to the church of a sabbatical.
4. Request a written overview of the sabbatical from the pastor upon return.
5. If agreed upon by session and the pastor, the sabbatical might be combined with vacation time and continuing education / study leave for extended study.
6. Meet all financial expectations for pastoral and pulpit services by others.

Committee on Ministry

1. Review the sabbatical timetable and usage plan as submitted by the pastor.
2. Serve as mediator in any concerns of the session or pastor relative to the sabbatical.
3. Determine who will moderate the session in the pastor's absence.
4. Work with the church to find funding for the Sabbatical Leave.

COVENANT AGREEMENT FOR A SABBATICAL SUPPLY

In accordance with the Book of Order and in order to set forth clearly an agreement for Sabbatical Supply service, the Session of _____ Church of _____ hereby desires The Reverend _____ to serve as Sabbatical Supply for the period of time and terms of agreement below. Both parties agree that this ministry will be faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to the historic principles of church order.

1. That the above-named pastor will begin service on _____, accountable to the Church Session,

and to the Presbytery of Genesee Valley through its Committee on Ministry, during the period of this covenant agreement.

2. The Sabbatical Supply agrees to provide (____ full time) (____ part time) pastoral leadership per week
3. This Covenant is for a period of ____ months, commencing on the date recorded above (# 1), after which the time period may be extended on recommendation by the Session, by letter to the Presbytery's Committee on Ministry for action and approval. This Covenant may be terminated earlier by either party, to take effect no sooner than 30 days of the receipt of a written notice by the other party with a copy to and the consent of the Committee on Ministry.
4. The Total Financial Terms of this Covenant shall be; \$ _____ (See attached Terms of Call Worksheet for details) for the contracted time period.
5. The Sabbatical Supply (____ will) (____ will not) serve as Moderator of the Session and congregation. If not, he/she will be invited to attend those meetings ex-officio; it is intended that the Sabbatical Supply and the designated Moderator operate in mutual contact.
6. The Sabbatical Supply enters into this Covenant with the Church Session and the Presbytery's Committee on Ministry, agreeing to be responsible for the following duties as prioritized:
 - ____ Preaching the Word, administering the sacraments, and leading the worship life of the congregation;
 - ____ Attending appropriate meetings of committees and seeing that accurate reports and records are kept;
 - ____ Visiting the sick and shut-in, and counseling members as needed;
 - ____ Conducting special worship services and teaching classes as needed;
 - ____ Officiating at weddings and funerals as necessary;
 - ____ Participating in Church and Community activities as able;
 - ____ Write Pastor's newsletter article and assist in newsletter preparation;
 - ____ Other Duties: Maintain office hours _____
7. The Session, for the congregation, promises to support and cooperate with the Sabbatical Supply in every way, assuming responsibility for:
 - a. Attending worship services and meetings;
 - b. Supporting the pastor in the church's ministry to the community;
 - c. Providing clerical assistance, as needed;
 - d. Supplementing member visitation (by elders and/or deacons);
 - e. Providing occasions for dialogue and member feedback.
8. The Session, for the congregation, also promises to encourage and support the Sabbatical Supply's attendance and participation in Presbytery meetings and functions.
9. The Session is responsible for the honoring of all financial obligations before the termination of the contract.
10. Copies of the Covenant shall be given to the following:
 - a. The Local Church Session
 - b. The Sabbatical Supply
 - c. The Committee on Ministry

SIGNED THIS DATE: _____

BY

_____, Clerk of Session
_____, Church Treasurer

_____, Sabbatical Supply
_____, PGV Committee on Ministry