

Sabbatical / Renewal
Leave for Pastors
in the
Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)

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Suggested Guidelines

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Guidelines for Sabbatical/Renewal Leave

*Vital congregational ministry depends on the leadership of pastors, . . .
whose hearts sing with vision, creativity, faith, competence and passion.*

--Richard Brueschoff, Clergy Renewal: The Alban Guide to Pastoral Sabbaticals

Remember the Sabbath day, to 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; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.

--Exodus 20: 8-11

The Lord said to Moses on Mount Sinai, "Say to the people of Israel, 'When you come into the land which I give you, the land shall keep a Sabbath to the Lord. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in its fruits, but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a sabbath to the Lord; you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard.'"

--Leviticus 25: 1-5

Renewal provides those opportunities for the heart to sing but Sabbath rest has become a lost concept in modern life. Current technology and multi-tasking have inhibited the ability to balance periods of work and rest. Many faithful people feel that they must work ever longer and harder even though this is contrary not only to the wisdom of biblical teachings but to all we know about learning, productivity and creativity. For peak performance, all humans need a good rhythm of work/rest. God's people today need to re-learn the importance of Sabbath.

Sabbatical/Renewal Leaves have proven to be a blessing to both congregations and pastoral leadership. Sabbath is a central biblical concept. The word "Sabbath" means "stop." As God rested from the work of creation, God also commands that very creation to stop working and rest.

The Pastor

Congregations expect much of their ministers and ministers expect much of themselves. In healthy relationships between congregations and their ministers, there is a sense of mutual care. The minister cares for the members of the congregation and they also care for the minister.

Temperament and practice must find a balance for healthy ministry. Everyone needs time away periodically to reflect, renew and recover the work/rest rhythm necessary to complement effective ministry.

A Sabbatical/Renewal Leave offers the minister time for reassessment of his/her ministry, which can be difficult to do while engaged in the day-to-day tasks for ministry. By changing the scene and the pace as well as engaging in different activities, ministers find themselves enriched spiritually, mentally and even physically.

The Congregation

When a minister takes a Sabbatical/Renewal Leave, the congregation will benefit from the opportunity to reflect on its mission and ministry, experience different gifts of

Jesus often withdrew from the crowds, for renewal and to seek a quiet place to pray:

*And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray.
--Matthew 14:23*

*And in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed,
--Mark 1:35*

*But so much more the report went abroad concerning him; and great multitudes gathered to hear and to be healed of their infirmities. But he withdrew to the wilderness and prayed.
--Luke 5:15-16*

*In these days he went out to the mountain to pray; and all night he continued in prayer to God.
--Luke 6:12*

leadership and perhaps discover their own unique areas of ministry.

A pre-sabbatical planning process that enhances skills of church leadership is vital for the success of the leave.

Once Upon A Time . . .

. . . there was a minister who, in addition to his service with the congregation, was very involved in community outreach. He served on community service boards and participated in their outreach projects. As part of the planning for his Renewal Leave, several members of the congregation agreed to take the minister's place on the community service boards and outreach projects. The church members discovered that they not only had the skills for doing the work, they enjoyed it. Then, as the time came for the minister to return, they wondered how they would tell him that they wanted to continue the community service.

Meanwhile, the minister was using his Renewal Leave to reflect on his ministry as well as his dreams and hopes for the congregation. He came to the conclusion that he needed and wanted to step back from so much community involvement. When he returned from his Renewal Leave, both he and the congregation were prepared and eager to make this change. The Renewal Leave allowed God space to work in both the congregation and minister. (A true story.)

What Is Sabbatical/Renewal Leave?

In the context of ministry, Sabbatical/Renewal time is for spiritual renewal and growth. It is therefore, personal and individual in nature. Most Sabbatical/Renewal Leaves include study, spiritual retreat and rest. Some studies have concluded that persons do best when they spend at least a portion of the leave away from familiar surroundings. In order for a fruitful renewal, one must assess current patterns. Time away allows this to occur.

While the elements of rest and relaxation are common to both vacation and Sabbatical/Renewal Leave, vacation is generally used for family time. However, many churches recognize that family is part of the renewal and encourage the minister to include family in part of the Sabbatical/Renewal Leave.

**What Disciples ministers
are saying about their
Sabbatical/Renewal time:**

The sabbatical renewal provided Community Christian Church and me a time for in-depth, refreshing reflection on diversity. After the sabbatical, the congregation noted that I had returned to Community's embrace with greater vitality than ever before and with a refined sense of what it takes for a congregation to be authentically, excitingly and joyfully diverse.

--Robert Lee Hill

*Community Christian Church
Kansas City, MO*

During my sabbatical leave the congregation was challenged to fulfill many responsibilities and became more self-reliant. I had three months to focus on my spiritual life and to enjoy some true relaxation. Upon my return there were more people willing to say "yes" to leadership responsibilities. In the process I was refreshed and able to give more of myself to the challenges of spiritual leadership and formation.

--Joanne VerBurg

*Covenant Christian Church
Cary, NC*

When Should Such A Leave Occur?

The academic model for sabbatical is one year of paid sabbatical after every seven years of service. In the past, those congregations that gave sabbaticals often followed the eligibility period but not the duration for sabbaticals.

Emerging models for the church are now providing Sabbatical/Renewal Leaves after shorter periods of service.

Most Regions of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) encourage a three-month Sabbatical/Renewal Leave after five years of ministry. Regardless of the duration, it is vital the leave be taken as a continuous, uninterrupted block of time.

Each congregation and its minister will want to consider the church year as well as its particular congregational cycles when planning the Sabbatical/Renewal Leave. For example, most churches (and ministers!) would not be enthusiastic about a Sabbatical during the entire season of Advent/Christmas or Lent/Easter.

It is helpful for a congregation to have a written Sabbatical/Renewal Leave policy. Typically, these policies include

1. *Eligibility for leave*
2. *Duration of the leave*
3. *How and to whom the leave request is made*
4. *Compensation issues*
5. *A report of how the leave was experienced*
6. *An expectation of continued ministry in that setting*

A sample policy from a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) congregation is included at the end of this document.

Staffing During Such A Leave

Both the congregation and minister may be concerned about fulfilling pastoral needs during the leave. Who will staff the church? Preach and lead worship on Sunday mornings? Celebrate weddings and funerals? Make hospital visits? Make church growth calls?

As a spiritual leader of the congregation, an elder or deacon might relish the opportunity to use his/her gifts and graces for ministry.

A retired minister might be delighted to serve the congregation in the minister's absence, knowing that this service would be for a short period of time. Some may even

*The break from routines
allowed the space and time
I needed to reflect on my life
and relationships. The travel,
rest and educational offerings
enriched my life and sense of
direction. There is an ongoing
process of listening to God to
ascertain how to employ all that
I gained during my leave.*

--Bob Dailey
First Christian Church
Bedford, IN

*The sabbatical was a time of
renewal for me and a time of new
leadership and learning for the
congregation as they attempted
to parallel my experience of
deeper prayer and worship as
well as more healthy physical
activity.*

--Sharon Watkins
Disciples Christian Church
Bartlesville, OK

*The sabbatical was an
unbelievable gift; it was much
needed and at the same time
an unspeakable luxury. . .the
congregation was never far from
my prayers and thoughts. Not in
a brooding, worrying sort of way,
but in a thankful, pleasing sort
of way.*

--Holly McKissick
St Andrew Christian Church
Olathe, KS

see such special service as a calling within their call.

Other options would be to hire a seminary intern or graduate or a licensed minister. Some are still awaiting a call after completing seminary or licensed ministry training. The congregation could offer the newly trained minister an opportunity to gain additional experience.

The Regional Minister or other regional staff may be able to commit to preach during the minister's leave. This would give the congregation and Regional Minister an opportunity to get to know each other better.

Funding A Sabbatical/Renewal Leave

Congregational leaders and ministers often assume that they cannot afford a Sabbatical/Renewal Leave. These concerns should not be roadblocks to discussing a Leave.

During the sabbatical, the congregation continues to provide salary, housing, Pension Plan dues and health care premiums for its minister.

It is best to plan ahead. If a congregation offered its minister a Sabbatical/Renewal Leave in five years and began setting aside just \$100.00 per month (or \$46.14 bi-weekly), in five years the congregation would have \$6,000.00 plus interest to fund many of the costs associated with the minister's leave.

A Concluding Word

A Sabbatical/Renewal Leave comes as a partnership between minister and congregation. Leave-taking and return are significant moments, appropriately marked in worship.

In the worship service immediately preceding the sabbatical, acknowledge the excitement, anticipation (as well as anxiety) in prayer, litany and exchange of symbols.

On the minister's return, the congregation will want to find ways to say, "Welcome back!" In the worship service through prayer, litany and exchange of gifts, acknowledge the minister's absence and return as well as changes that have taken place in the congregation.

Congregations that celebrate both the beginning of the Sabbatical as well as their minister's return discover that they are richly blessed.

Sample Sabbatical/Renewal Leave Policy

The congregation affirms that continuing education involvements and leaves are beneficial to both the ministerial staff and congregation. Such opportunities are intended to enhance skills, increase competence and expand horizons of the minister for his or her ministry with the congregation. Time is granted each year for short-term study opportunities. Occasions for longer term extended study (sabbatical) will also be considered under the conditions detailed below. Sabbaticals provide prime opportunities for renewal of spirit, extended study, reflections and planning and creative growth that normal routines do not allow.

- 1. Members of the full-time ministerial staff shall be eligible for a three-month sabbatical leave after completing six years of employment by University Park Christian Church. After a sabbatical has been completed, the minister shall be eligible for a sabbatical again in five years.*
- 2. Such leaves are intended for the mutual benefit and growth of both the minister and the congregation. The timing for the sabbatical leave is a concern and must be compatible with the congregation's present needs and programming. Therefore, the time of the sabbatical leave and its funding must be approved by the Board.*
- 3. The minister should begin the request process in the year before the intended sabbatical and complete the process at least six months before the desired sabbatical's beginning. A formal written proposal should be developed and include expectations, focus of the sabbatical, presumed benefits for and impact upon one's work in the ministry, and detailing of the work being left behind. The contents of the proposal should be considered negotiable with the Cabinet and approved by the Board.*
- 4. Sabbaticals shall not be considered a use of the minister's vacation time. Earned vacation time would not be ordinarily used to extend the period of absence beyond three months.*
- 5. Financial support of the minister by the congregation during a sabbatical leave will continue full salary and housing allowance, retirement benefits, books and journals and insurance.*
- 6. During the sabbatical year, no other continuing education time will be provided. In addition, the minister is entitled to a proportionate share of the budgeted travel allowance for the year.*
- 7. The Moderator of the Board will appoint, and the Board approve, a special task force to be known as the Sabbatical Committee. This committee's basic responsibilities will be to manage and coordinate congregational work being left behind by the minister and to assure quality care of the congregation during the minister's leave. The committee will meet with the minister prior to the sabbatical to develop an understanding of and plans to accomplish those tasks. Immediately after the sabbatical, the committee will bring the minister up-to-date on the congregation's life and programs. The committee will have at least five members, which will include the Moderator of the Board and an Elder of the congregation.*

8. *The hiring of any individuals to serve as replacement for staff on a sabbatical leave will be negotiated by the Sabbatical Committee and be approved by the Board.*
9. *In order for the congregation to benefit from the personal and professional renewal of its ministerial leadership after a paid sabbatical leave of absence, the minister shall remain in the employment of the congregation for at least one year following the minister's return from the sabbatical.*
10. *No two members of the staff may be on sabbatical leave within nine months of each other.*
11. *Evaluations of the sabbatical leave and its impact on the minister and the congregation are helpful means for planning such future opportunities. Evaluative reports should be submitted to the Cabinet and shared with the congregation by both the Sabbatical Committee and the minister within thirty days after the leave is completed. The reports should include the benefits and disappointments for both the minister and the congregation, as well as any recommendations for the future.*

Policy on Ministerial Sabbaticals
University Park Christian Church
Indianapolis, Indiana

A Worship Service of Sending Forth

Bethany Christian Church
Tulsa, Oklahoma

Prelude

Call to worship

L: Our steps are made firm by the Lord.

R: When God delights in our way.

L: Though we stumble we shall not fall headlong.

R: For the Lord holds us by the hand.

All: May our hearts not turn back nor our steps depart from God's way.

Opening Hymn

"How Lovely, Lord, How Lovely"

Invocation

Hymn of Preparation "Christ Beside Me"

(tune: Morning Has Broken)

1. Christ beside me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Lord of my heart; Christ within me, Christ below me, Christ above me, never to part.
2. Christ on my right hand, Christ on my left hand, Christ all around me, shield in the strife; Christ in my sleeping, Christ in my sitting, Christ in my rising, light of my life.
3. Christ be in all hearts, thinking about me, Christ be on all tongues telling of me; Christ be the vision in eyes that see me, in ears that hear me, Christ ever be.
4. Christ beside me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Lord of my heart; Christ within me, Christ below me, Christ above me, never to part.

The Reading of the Word

Genesis 12: 1-9
Hebrews 11: 13-16

Prayer Hymn

"Lead Me Lord"

Celebrations and Concerns of the Community

M: The Lord be with you.

C: And with Your Spirit.

Sabbatical Prayer (based on prayers attributed to St. Patrick & blessing from the *Carmine Gadelica*)

Spirit of Fire, kindle in our hearts

A flame of love for all your children
for friend and foe, and kindred all

Teach us to love each other;

without malice, without jealousy, without envy,

without fear of any under the sun.

Shield _____ (minister) (and _____ (spouse))

on their sabbatical journey

with strong power of the seraphim

with angels and archangels attending,

with the prayers of the prophets and apostles,

the companionship of the saints,

the power of the Holy Trinity

Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit.

Bless [_____ (associate minister) and] our congregational
leaders;

Your strength to direct them,

Your power to sustain them,

Your wisdom to guide them,

Your vision to light them,

Your ear to their hearing,

Your word to their speaking,

Your pathway before them.

The guarding of Christ surround our congregation,
each step of our journey.

to aid us and enfold us,

Each day and night. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Gloria Patri

The Reading of the Gospel

Mark 6: 6b-13

The Word in Music

"Irish Blessing"

Choir

Sermon

Communion Hymn *“When You Do This, Remember Me”*

Communion

Offering

Doxology

Prayer of Dedication

Hymn of Invitation *“He Leadeth Me, O Blessed Thought”*

Sabbatical Send Out and Transition of Leadership

People: As a family of Christians, we proclaim our love for God, Jesus, and one another. As a family of Christians, we send out our pastor (and spouse) on a journey of faith. As a family of Christians we know that time and distance do not separate us from love for one another in Christ. As a family of Christians, we pray, dear God, that you will bless _____ (minister) [and _____ (spouse)] and this congregation during this sabbatical, so that we all may grow in faith. We ask this in the name of Christ, who connects us all in the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Leader: The path you walk, Christ walks it. May the lands in which you travel be without sorrow. May the Trinity protect you wherever you stay, Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. Bright angels walk with you, dear presence, in every dealing. Favourable company, be with you. May you arrive at every place, may you return home. May every path before you be smooth; man, woman and child welcome you. A truly good journey. Amen.

The Benediction

The Sending Out Hymn *“Go Now In Peace”*

Considerations

- This worship service was followed by a reception in the Fellowship Hall. Display boards were mounted to help the congregation follow the route of the Sabbatical pilgrimage, especially to England, Scotland and Ireland.
- Members of the congregation also pledged to pray regularly during the Sabbatical for the pastor and spouse, for the associate minister and congregational leaders, for the staff and for the growth of the congregation.
- In another congregation, the leave-taking was symbolized when the minister turned over the church keys to the interim minister. Then the chair of the sabbatical committee prayed over their linked hands.
- Upon the minister’s return, a celebration of welcome and return might include a prayer of thanksgiving such as the following:
Eternal God, your presence among us is welcomed and cherished. You have filled this community of faith with your Spirit as it works to be the body of Christ in a world of change and growth. Thank you for the leadership that was offered us through _____ (associate or interim minister), and thank you for the safe return of our pastor, _____. As we move forward from this day, give us the wisdom and vision to find new ways of being in this world. We ask in the name of Christ, who connects us all in the Holy Spirit. Amen.
- If there was an exchange of symbols at the leave-taking, the minister and congregation will want to reverse the exchange in the service of welcome and return.

Resources

Books

Bullock, Richard and Bruesehoff, Richard J. *Clergy Renewal: The Alban Guide to Clergy Sabbatical Planning*. The Alban Institute, 2000.

Oswald, Roy M. and Kroeger, Otto. *Sabbatical Planning for Clergy and Congregations*. The Alban Institute, 1988. Out of print but available through Amazon.com.

Sevier, Melissa Bane. *Journeying Toward Renewal: A Spiritual Companion for Pastoral Sabbaticals*. The Alban Institute, 2002.

Videos

Why You Should Give Your Pastor a Sabbatical. Available from the Alban Institute.

For additional copies,
a downloadable PDF version of this document can be found at:
www.discipleshomemissions.org/Ministers/MinistryGuidelines/PDF.htm

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