

A Guide for Sabbaticals

Introduction

We believe that providing an opportunity for leaders to step away briefly from the persistent obligations of daily congregational life and to engage in a period of renewal and reflection will strengthen them with blessing that will overflow to those whom they serve.

We recognize that renewal periods are not vacations but time for intentional exploration and reflection, for drinking again from God's life-giving water, and for regaining the enthusiasm and creativity for ministry. In some cases, it could be detachment from all ministry in order to shift from producing to being, and in some cases, it could be other ministry and/or types of renewal outside their own congregation.

Therefore, in order to encourage significant growth in ministry for the advancement of the vision and to increase the likelihood of longer leader tenure, the overseer board has adopted the following as a guide.

Oversight

Sabbaticals should be planned with the overseer or the local ministry using the following guidelines. These might seem unnecessary to some, but those with experience know the value of these. It can eliminate problems that could arise during the sabbatical.

1. Appoint a mentor/coach to serve as an objective guide as one navigates the sabbatical. (Check role responsibilities.)
2. Appoint a liaison to serve as the link between the leader on sabbatical and the church leadership/congregation. This is what keeps the leader connected. (Check *The Role of a Mentor* responsibilities.)
3. The mentor/coach sees that a sabbatical plan and objectives are created for reference. This can add to the objectives being accomplished. (Check sample for *Sabbatical Plan and Objectives*.)

Sabbatical Length

Six to twelve months is often a good length, depending on personal situations. If the sabbatical is more of a "stress leave," then it may be necessary to have more time to process what got the leader to this place of exhaustion. Shorter sabbaticals that take place more often, as opposed to longer sabbaticals that take place sporadically, are usually preferable because they help keep a leader at his best. During the sabbatical, regular financial support should be considered for the one taking a sabbatical.

Planning for Sabbaticals

1. Consider the season: There are rhythms and seasons in a church's life that need to be considered in scheduling a sabbatical. The pastor should take leave at a good time in the church's life.
2. Care for the flock: Prior to a sabbatical, the pastor and leadership team need to plan for the shepherding of the flock in the pastor's absence. The purpose of the sabbatical will be gutted if the pastor is regularly interrupted to care for the flock. Assign the preaching, counseling, funerals, and all the other regular duties.
3. Plan the sabbatical: The pastor needs to plan well in advance what he will be doing on the sabbatical; otherwise, the precious time can be wasted away.
4. Involve the congregation: The pastor needs to share his plans with the congregation prior to his leaving so they can join him in his excitement and pray for fruit. The pastor will benefit from his sabbatical, but the congregation should, too!

5. Communicate: It is possible that a pastor on sabbatical may frequently be absent from his home congregation. Under such circumstances the pastor on sabbatical should maintain regular communication with his congregation through bulletin reports, reports shared by others, etc. (See *The Role of the Liaison*.)
6. Set parameters: If the pastor does not leave town, both pastor and church should have some understandings about contacting him. Unneeded interruptions can halt fruitful thought and easily slide into a resumption of duties. (See *The Role of the Liaison*.)
7. Be accountable: Consider setting up a system of accountability between the pastor on sabbatical and a fellow pastor/elder or board – leader to leader. (See *The Role of the Liaison*.)
8. Seek Advice: The pastor on sabbatical should have one person they know they can go to for advice and counsel. (See *The Role of a Mentor*.)

Goals for a Sabbatical

1. To Rest: The word “sabbatical” is derived from “Sabbath,” which means cessation or rest. Everyone needs rest, including Jesus. Often members of a congregation do not know all of the load a pastor carries. In addition to the actual work they accomplish, there is the constant concern for the church. The Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 11:28, “And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.” God rested the seventh day, and Jesus Himself occasionally withdrew from the crowds for rest and recharging. So, rest is one of the primary, but not the only, reason for a sabbatical.
2. To Recharge: Far too often we are tempted to downplay the reality of spiritual warfare. But Scripture reminds us that “we battle not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places,” Ephesians 6:12. A pastor is on the front lines of this battle. Jesus found Himself becoming weary in ministry and the need for some time away to recharge spiritually and physically.
3. To Reflect: Pastors spend much of their time and energy focusing externally rather than internally. Much time is spent on the needs of the congregation. But pastors also have souls and internal needs as well. Deliberate times of solitude, silence, and Sabbath are needed if a pastor is to care for the health of his own soul as he does for the souls of others. A sabbatical provides time and space for extended, purposeful introspection and reflection.
4. To Refocus: The tyranny of the urgent, the immediate needs of those around him, the pressing concerns of “right now” tend to dull a leader’s vision, pulling his mind toward what’s immediate. A sabbatical releases a leader from the tyranny of the present and allows him to refocus his leadership energy on the road ahead.
5. To Renew: Continuous spiritual renewal is the key to a vibrant and effective church. And renewal in the church begins with renewal in its leaders. So, the ultimate goal of a sabbatical is individual renewal in the pastor’s soul, which often spurs broader renewal in the church at large. Renewed worship, renewed joy, renewed purpose, renewed energy, renewed love for God and others. Areas of personal renewal are spiritual, emotional, physical, mental, and social.
 - a. **Spiritual:** Many people don’t realize the toll that ministerial serving has on a pastor’s spiritual life. It’s easy for him to focus on his role as servant to the exclusion of his relationship as God’s child. Either through some planned personal quiet times or through a planned retreat, it’s important to be replenished by God’s Spirit and reminded of his own walk with Christ. Remember – “the joy of the Lord is our strength.”
 - b. **Emotional:** One of the dangers of a pastor’s continual pouring out of himself to meet the spiritual and emotional needs of others is that he himself may become a wounded healer. Carrying the needs and wounds of others may wound himself. Sabbaticals are an excellent time to step back from the pain and needs of others and focus on his own needs and emotional health and healing.

- c. **Physical:** Physical rest is a number one ingredient. It involves time away from the ever-present responsibility for other people's souls and the leadership of a congregation. It also allows time to rest and regain strength and freshness physically, emotionally and spiritually. God-honoring recreation can be both emotionally and physically reinvigorating. It may help to restore physical and emotional strength.
- d. **Mental:** Wells that continually have water drawn from them run the risk of going dry. They need to be replenished. Sabbaticals provide an excellent opportunity for reading to refill the well. Intentional study is an excellent way to be sharpened mentally and prepare for further useful ministry. Both will serve to help keep abreast of the ever-changing social landscape in which both the leader and the people he serves live.
- e. **Social:** Family often pays a high price for the pastor's ministry. He is often so consumed with ministry that his family and closest friends don't get much attention. Sabbaticals are a good time to give his best to the people closest to him. A family vacation or extra activities will be welcomed by those closest to him. Having some extra-special date nights would also be a real bonus for him and his spouse.

The Role of a Mentor

Typically, a mentor, or coach, is someone from outside of the organization who serves as an objective guide as one navigates the sabbatical. A mentor applies knowledge and experience to the situation in one or more of the following ways. Ideally, this mentor has taken a sabbatical and/or has proven experience as a mentor.

1. Helps to define and/or refine sabbatical plans.
2. Meets or converses periodically throughout the sabbatical.
3. Provides accountability regarding objectives and boundaries.
4. Challenges to go beyond familiarity.
5. Engages with issues that inhibit growth.
6. Directs to relevant resources.
7. Serves as a spiritual companion to help recognize what God is doing in the leader's life.
8. Focuses attention beyond the temporal and toward the eternal.
9. Reviews the sabbatical report before presenting it to the church leaders.
10. Participates in the debriefing process and establishes ongoing mentoring regarding following through on sabbatical learnings.
11. Participates in post-sabbatical celebration and appreciation events.

The Role of a Liaison

Linking the Leader on Sabbatical with the Church and its Leaders

1. Carries complete itinerary and contact information and informs key persons of any changes during the sabbatical.
2. Serves to provide a singular, clear link for communication between the leader and the church and connects regularly throughout the sabbatical.
3. Filters out any information that is not necessary for the leader on sabbatical to know.
4. Protects the leader from re-engaging unnecessarily in the issues, daily administration, or challenges in which the church may be engaged. He upholds the boundaries set by mutual agreement.
5. Forwards to the appropriate church leaders/members any overlooked matter or arrangement that comes to mind in the first week or so of the sabbatical which were not planned for or concluded prior to departure. This is especially significant if this sabbatical is away from home.

6. Forwards to the leader only those things that are of a personal need-to-know basis; for example, the death of a person or significant experience on the part of someone who is a close friend.
7. Reports the status and nature of the leader's experience to the church periodically.
8. Communicates mutual sentiments of blessing.
9. Communicates how God is at work regarding the church and the leader as appropriate.
10. Contacts and relates to the leader's spouse, if married, in order to keep the relationships inclusive.
11. Encourages the leader to stay focused on the objectives of the sabbatical. However, this person is not responsible for accountability, which is the role of the sabbatical mentor.
12. Keeps a list of "interesting-to-know" items to share with the sabbatical participant upon return; for example, someone's daughter announcing her engagement.
13. Participates in debriefing the sabbatical arrangements, boundaries, and benefits.

Sabbatical Plan and Objectives

Model for Pastor/Wife/Family

For "Our Town" Fellowship

Purpose:

To engage in an extended period of time to rest, to recharge, to reflect, to refocus, and to renew spiritually, emotionally, physically, mentally, and socially.

Duration:

The sabbatical is scheduled for four months running from May 15 through September 15.

Objectives:

1. To detach from regular pattern and weight of ministry responsibilities.
2. To rest and engage in activity that renews physical and emotional stamina for the work ahead.
3. To create new habits (patterns for ongoing lifestyle and ministry).
4. To pursue greater intimacy with God, being transformed through a deepening knowledge of the heart of the Father, the glory of the Son, and the anointing of the Holy Spirit.
5. To enrich my wife's marriage through more direct experiences together and pursuing mutually beneficial goals.
6. To enrich our children's lives with personally engaging in their lives.
7. To sharpen skills in ministry leadership through strategically selected study, reading, etc.

Activities (tentative):

1. Trip to Israel.
2. Connect with relatives (visits, writing).
3. Regular walking, gardening, and hiking.
4. Personal retreats for study, reading, writing.
5. Attend EBI for one term.

Accountability:

1. Meet with mentor once per quarter or call on demand.
2. Supply liaison with information to put in the bulletin twice a month.

Credits:

Navigating Your Sabbatical by Keith Yoder

Promoting Pastoral Health through Sabbaticals by Elvin Ressler

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