**Sabbatical**

**What is it and What are the benefits?**

Most every minister and church has heard about sabbaticals, but few if any can fully explain what it is other than spending time away from one’s occupation.

**Is it a Vacation?** No, it is different from a regular vacation. The purpose of a vacation time is for the individual or family to spend time away from their work to enjoy activities and time together as a family. It may include rest, but the purpose is to spend quality time together.

**What is a Sabbatica**l? One person describes a sabbatical as giving a person a healthy amount of time to **enhance their academic qualifications, pursue new interests, do volunteer work, travel, address physical concerns, or re-prioritize their life and career**. It's an opportunity to manage the effects of professional burnout.

**NOTE:** Since the sabbatical is for a key employee, this article will use the name “pastor” to describe this key person, but it can also include others who are important to the church. Each person considered may have their own set of guidelines.

A sabbatical may not be for every pastor and every church cannot afford to provide one so what are the advantages and how can that help the church and pastor? I have listed a few advantages.

**Advantages of a Sabbatical:**

* **Pastor may return rejuvenated and often feel like they have a new job, purpose, or new direction.  Many pastors may perform their role routinely day in and day out, can** experience burnout or feel unmotivated to perform their duties. An extended time away is the perfect way for a pastor to recharge and come back to work with renewed focus.  One person wrote, "They are giving me the opportunity to have some reflection time and rejuvenate. It also allowed me to evaluate my goals and effectiveness as a pastor.”
* **Pastors find inspiration for new ways to grow the church.  The time away is well spent in research,** going to other churches to attend or speak with other pastors, expand their education, or time alone in prayer and meditation that is often interrupted when conducting normal duties.
* **Pastors can focus on personal and church goals. Pastors may not be able to do this separately when they are so focused on church duties or responsibilities.** While on the sabbatical, the pastor has an opportunity to rediscover old interests and friends, explore new ideas, travel, get fit, do retirement pre-planning or a special project, take care of family needs, and much more. It can broaden one’s perspective and makes personal and professional priorities clearer."
* **Younger pastors have the opportunity to grow into their roles. Too often a new or younger pastor is thrown into service right out of college or seminary. They have not had time to develop “into a pastor” or expand their skill set.**
* **The leadership of the church can grow from within.** Church growth can come when its leadership is given the opportunity to lead. While the pastor is away, the leadership and staff can use their skill sets to train others or fill in. This can create or build greater depth, experience, and flexibility.
* **Pastors are encouraged to remain with the church. The church is actually investing in their pastor and its future.** Sabbaticals is usually based or rewarded on tenure. It is a joint cooperative effort by the pastor and its leadership to continue moving the church forward with its current pastor with the idea that a sabbatical will benefit the church and pastor. In other words, it is a win-win proposition.
* **Churches show they care about their pastor as a person, their future as well as the future of the church. Pastors want to remain with a church who is interested in their health and well-being as well as the church understanding the importance of pastoral balance. Too many pastors in the past have sacrificed time away from their family and personal life for the sake of the church. Many pastors have left feeling as if the church did not care about them “as a person”. Many younger pastors and churches need to understand balance between work and person life.**
* **Churches can experience reduced pastors turnover when they implement a sabbatical.**  When pastors feel the church is investing in them as a person, it makes them feel appreciated and has enough value to invest in them. Pastors have a longer tenure at churches who invests in their live and career.
* **The church is benefited**. The church gets a pastor with a renewed spirit, vision, and direction for the church. They seem more focused on what God is calling them to do with a mindset of unfinished business and seeing greater things ahead for the church and their ministry.

While companies may resist the idea of sabbaticals, they provide great benefits for the pastor and church. In a workplace where pastors are at the center, they must feel valued or else they tend to look elsewhere. Churches must be innovative with how they are attracting and retaining their pastors.

**What are the Disadvantages of a Sabbatical?**

**Cost and administrative difficulties** are the most obvious negatives to offering sabbaticals. Other downsides might include an emotional disconnection from the church depending on how they communicate it with its membership. There may be a decrease in the normal productivity of the church as work and responsibilities are shifted to others during the sabbatical.

**Is the Sabbatical Paid by the Church?**

Often, a sabbatical is paid leave, with the pastor receiving their full salary or a percentage of it. However, it may be an unpaid leave at some churches. It usually depends on the leadership of the church, its finances, the nature of the leave, and other qualifications or requirements that are met.

**Planning for a Sabbatical**

When you consider the benefits it can provide, a sabbatical may seem like a wonderful idea. However, it's important for the pastor and church to consider what might be given up during this leave. For instance, depending on the church policy, a pastor may not draw a full salary or benefits. Here are some points to consider when planning for a sabbatical.

**What should be the length of a Sabbatical?**

The length of a sabbatical can be one month, 3 months, 6 months, 9 months, or one year depending on what you wish to accomplish. For pastors who were tired and needed time to rest and reflect over tough issues or problems, a one-month sabbatical seemed to work. Pastors who took a one-month sabbatical said, “The first week was a time of adjustment, still feeling the effects of the ministry demands. The second week seemed to bring rest but had feelings of guilt of being away from my church. The third week seem to focus on study and meditation with goal setting. The fourth week seem to bring an anxiousness to get back to church and resume responsibilities. To me, this was not truly a sabbatical, but a time needed for rest, meditation, and healing.

True sabbaticals have a goal and strategy in mind. Three-month and nine-month sabbaticals are most common with nine-months associated with furthering one’s education. No matter what type of sabbatical you desire to implement, the goal is to have purpose with a great deal of planning. All should have a win-win outcome.

**Make sabbaticals win-win.**

Let’s be honest, there is a risk that a great pastor who takes a sabbatical may not return. Pastors have a surprising amount of influence on that decision. There needs to be a great deal of planning before making a Sabbatical Policy. Sabbatical-takers were least likely to return when the sabbatical was a last resort so planning and implementing such a sabbatical is relatively easy-to-implement with preventative measures.

**Sample Sabbatical Guide for Churches**

The benefits of sabbaticals for leaders are well documented. Even though we are providing guidelines for the church board and pastor, we can learn from other nonprofits on what they are doing. A study of five sabbatical programs over five years shows that sabbaticals not only provide needed respite to nonprofit leaders, but they also increase organizational capacity, aid succession planning, and strengthen governance, *D. Linnell and T. Wolfred, Creative Disruption: Sabbaticals for Capacity Building and Leadership Development in the Nonprofit Sector (2010).*

**PREPARING FOR A SUCCESSFUL SABBATICAL**

6-12 Months Prior to Departing:

* Decide on the best time to take a sabbatical and put it on your organization’s calendar. Schedule it so that you can make a continuous break, i.e., don’t plan on being away for one month, returning for the big fundraiser, and then leaving again.
* Don’t shortchange yourself on time. **For purposes of this outline, I have chosen a 3-month sabbatical.** Three months is ideal. One or two months is too short, and anything more than four months can be too taxing for staff. Shoot for three, if you can. You don’t know when you are going to get another opportunity like this.
* Decide on your interim leadership structure. Depending on how it is configured, it might be a team that divides up the work and tasks ahead.
* Develop an interim leader or team job description. The job description should indicate that the interim will manage that part of the church or responsibility based on existing policies and does not have the authority to make major policy or strategy changes.
* Create a written plan for how decisions will be made, and work will be handled. Be very clear about decision-making. It is usually handled through your board on a majority decision if it is outside of the perimeters set in your planning. Being organized and having laid out a well-planned foundation is imperative. Think through both every day and worst-case scenarios.
* Have regular meetings with the interim leadership team in the months prior of the pastor’s departure to ensure open communication, whether in person or through email.
* The pastor needs to set aside time every week or two to plan what you are going to do on your sabbatical. If you are planning a trip, research travel destinations, housing, and additional costs should be considered. Some sabbaticals include spending time with family and friends. Planning your sabbatical can be a respite itself.
* Plan a trip for the beginning of the sabbatical. The best thing you can do is get out of town right away. If you are traveling internationally, make sure your passport is up to date and that you obtain necessary visas. Book all travel with your personal, not your work, contact information.
* When planning, keep in mind that you should not over-plan your sabbatical. Allow unscheduled time to relax. Don’t transfer your Type A work performance compulsions to pleasurable activities.

**Considerations for the Pastor:**

**3-6 Months Prior to Departing:**

Invite interim leader(s) to shadow you in the weeks leading up to your departure. If you aren’t doing it already, have staff members attend board meetings so that staff and board can get to know one another better and communicate freely. Delegate a representative to represent the church on outside meetings you would normally attend.

Give detailed written instructions to your interim leadership about whom to contact about what, where things are located, passwords, etc. These instructions will be useful long after your sabbatical.

**0-3 Months Prior to Departing:**

Set up a strategy for when it would be appropriate for the office to contact you in case of emergency. For example, the board chair or representative must decide in person, face to face, that a call cannot be avoided. Impress upon board and staff that this is reserved for true emergencies and not just troubling news or sticky situations. Part of this experience is for the board and staff to learn how to make decisions on their own and act without checking in with the pastor. Allow yourself to enjoy and conduct their sabbatical without worrying about church issues or unnecessary interruptions.

Don’t try to do your work in advance, such as preparing everything ahead of time. If adequate planning has been done ahead of time, trust your leadership and staff to make the right decisions. In the last month before you leave, have the interim leadership team make the executive decisions they will have to make in your absence. Praise and communicate anything else that could have been done or considered.

Express gratitude to your staff and board. If possible, give a bonus to the staff members who are stepping up. Ask the board chair to pay special attention to the interim leadership team when you are gone, or to designate a board member to be the staff liaison.

If board members are in the habit of being in regular communication with you, let them know that they should take the initiative to communicate this to interim leadership staff.

Remember that nothing changes much in three months. Don’t start anything new in the last month before you leave. Designate someone to sort through your work emails, voicemails and correspondence and reroute them. The goal should be that you do not return to a huge pile of unfinished business, but that business as usual continued without you.

Contact key people and major funders to let them know you are going on sabbatical and whom they should contact in your absence. Create outgoing messages for your email and voicemail that clearly state you are away on sabbatical and cannot be reached until X date. Provide information about the contact person who will manage in your absence.

If you use a mobile phone for work, leave it behind and purchase a prepaid mobile phone for use during your sabbatical. Have a plan for how you will deal with social media. Facebook and Instagram might be a great way to stay in touch with friends, but it can be difficult if not impossible to shut out the work world. If you want to stay on social media, see about a adjusting your settings to limit contact with your work world.

Have someone to call for support as you prepare, perhaps someone else you know that has also been on a sabbatical.

**During Your Sabbatical:**

Plan to leave town immediately, even for a short-distance trip. It’s hard to resist the urge to check in when you’re in close physical proximity to work, especially at the beginning. You will be exhausted at the beginning, so don’t try to do too much right away. Many people find that it takes at least two weeks to unwind.

One of your goals should include whatever can recharge your batteries. It may include reading a book, listening to music, discovering an old or new hobbies, taking long walks, or visiting going to new places. Enjoy unscheduled time. This may include spending time by yourself.

Resist the temptation to check your work email, getting on Facebook, or talk to someone about church news. You know that it’s a black hole that will suck you in. Some churches will change church passwords so the pastor will not be tempted to log in.

Don’t be surprised if you experience disorientation at the beginning of the sabbatical as you learn to disconnect from your work identity. It is taking a break and then proceed to your assignment.

After a time of relaxation, then tackle your assignment. It has been my experience that it is hard to think about doing new things if you are still attached to the old ones. You have already planned on what you are going to do during your sabbatical so do it.

Prayer and meditation should be at the forefront of your sabbatical time asking God to make you a better pastor, asking Him to reveal what He wants you to accomplish from this time forward, exploring new and creative ways to make this possible, use this time to learn, study, research, and develop ways that will guide your church to better and greater things. The goal for any sabbatical is for its leader to come back refreshed and excited about implementing new and fresh ideas with other church leaders.

**Your Return to Work**

Don’t overbook your return – have a “stealth week” when you are back in the office. Do not make appointments or attend meetings so you can catch up. You can do this gradually. Consider working reduced hours the first week or come back to work on a Wednesday so that you start with a half-week.

Ease back into your routine. Plan your first contacts, be patient to explain anything new to other leaders, get them on board before starting anything, and to slowly implement your plan. You will probably also observe some of the changes that took place when you were gone.

Meet with your interim team to learn what happened when you were gone, and what worked and didn’t work with the new management structure. Don’t be critical if they handled situations differently than you would have.

Take the time to reflect with your staff about what they learned about themselves and the team. This is an opportunity for a reboot, a time the organization in a fresh way.

When you return, everyone may seem like they are moving too fast, talking too fast, making decisions too fast. You probably used to be like this also. It will take time to readjust. You may want to permanently implement some of the changes that were made while you were gone.

Don’t experience the post-sabbatical blues. You may feel sad that your sabbatical is over but at the same time, you should be excited about implementing what God has given to you. Express your gratitude to your staff and board again.

There may be some things you have learned during your sabbatical such as placing some new boundaries around work, the importance of taking a vacation every year, and the need to continually improve your profession. You may also consider planning a sabbatical policy for your staff.

**Sabbatical Leave Application**

Your Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Current Position: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Why are you requesting a sabbatical? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Duration of Sabbatical:

One Month 3 months 6 months 9 months 1 year

The purpose of this sabbatical:

Personal Time with Family

Rest & Refocus on Career Objectives

Professional Improvement

Expand Volunteer Work

Write a Book

Short Term Classwork

Education

Other: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Proposed Dates: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Estimated Cost of Your Sabbatical: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Does Sabbatical include:

Full Salary & Benefits

Half Salary/Full Benefits

No Salary/Full Benefits

Please include the following:

* Please describe how you will use the sabbatical time. Please provide a plan and description of where and what would this look like.
* How will this benefit the church?
* How this will this personally benefit you, your career, and family.
* Will part of this time be spent for rest or to rejuvenation? Will this include any unused vacation time?

Your Signature: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature of Board Member Date

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature of Board Member Date

Official Board Meeting Minutes Must Be Attached