

EMC Pastoral Sabbatical Policy

In the ministry of Jesus we see him both going out to do service and retreating to spend time with his Father. Jesus insisted that his ministry include both active service, and retreat for prayer and refreshment. For Jesus, going away to pray was not preparing for ministry; it was part of his mission from the Father.

Pastors likewise have a calling to both active works of service which include preaching, caregiving, administration and leadership, and times of retreat, prayer, and absorbing God's Word. Both giving and receiving are necessary in ministry, and yet many pastors find that their work is so taken up with the active side of ministry that the inner, receiving side of ministry is neglected. There need to be occasional times set aside, away from the demands of the church, for the pastor to do the ministry of study, prayer, spiritual disciplines and service beyond the congregation. Many pastors find that a regular rhythm of sabbaticals enables them to remain spiritually deep and alive to what God calls them to do over a long ministry.

What is a sabbatical? A sabbatical is not a right, like a wage. Rather it is a gift that gracious congregations can give to bless and encourage their pastor. A sabbatical is a designated time of several months when a pastor withdraws from active involvement in the church for training, refreshment and service. It is not a vacation, though it should be refreshing to the pastor and the pastor's family.

1. Sabbaticals can include several types of activities:
 - a. Education and learning. Attending conferences and workshops, taking courses at a seminary, and reading books are excellent sabbatical activities. Often it is helpful for the church leadership and the pastor to agree on a theme for education ahead of time that will benefit the pastor's ministry in the church.
 - b. Service. Opportunities like short-term mission trips, MDS work, teaching, or working in the local soup kitchen are excellent ways for the pastor to experience a change of pace while learning about important ministry skills. Visiting the church's missionaries overseas is an excellent use of sabbatical time.
 - c. Spiritual retreat. Planned prayer retreats or worship times that enable the minister to reconnect with Jesus in solitude renew the soul at the centre of ministry. The benefit of doing this while on sabbatical is that it can be done apart from the need to plan next week's sermon.
 - d. Personal refreshment activities such as travel, hiking, woodworking, or other hobbies can provide good spaces for personal reflection.
 - e. Pastors need to withdraw from congregational life during the sabbatical. Pastoral visits, attending worship, attending meetings, performing weddings and funerals, and carrying out conference duties are placed on hold during this time. Ideally the pastor will leave the community during the sabbatical to avoid slipping back into congregational life. The goal is for the pastor to have a complete reprieve from responsibility. The congregation will need to be taught by the board that this is the goal.
2. How are sabbaticals structured?
 - a. A sabbatical policy should normally become part of the salary and benefits package negotiated at the time the pastor is engaged.
 - b. Sabbaticals should be granted at regular intervals usually after 6-8 years of ministry. It is better to take a sabbatical before burnout happens, rather than when the pastor is already emotionally depleted.
 - c. A sabbatical will be followed by at least two years of ministry in the church. If the pastor leaves before two years, it may be suitable for the pastor to pay back some of the

- sabbatical wages. However, this expectation needs to be an explicit part of the sabbatical agreement before the sabbatical is taken.
- d. A good sabbatical length is 3-4 months. Pastors may wish to add their vacation time to the sabbatical. A sabbatical that is less than this is too short to fully disengage emotionally from the work. A sabbatical leave that is longer may create too big a discontinuity, making it more difficult for both the church and the pastor to resume the previous relationship.
 - i. Avoid the temptation to make the sabbatical easier for the church by splitting it up and taking it in small pieces over several years. This does not allow the pastor to disengage fully, and it can create the perception in the congregation that the pastor is always gone.
 - e. Pastors will receive two-thirds of their salary while on sabbatical. They will accrue vacation time at two-thirds time while on sabbatical. Any money received from other assignments during the sabbatical that go beyond the remaining one-third salary should be forwarded to the church.
 - f. Additional financial support for expenses incurred by the pastor on a sabbatical may be negotiated. For example, expenses like travel costs or education fees may qualify for this kind of additional remuneration.
3. Returning from the sabbatical.
- a. In the last week or two of the sabbatical, the pastor should begin to re-engage slowly, making some contacts, and creating a set of written “New Practices”, resolutions that the pastor has determined will become a regular part of ministry.
 - b. A congregation will be more likely to understand the benefits of the sabbatical if pastors share with the church about their activities and learning’s on the sabbatical.
 - c. Pastors need to beware of their feelings of “sabbatical guilt” when returning. There may be a temptation to reward the congregation for its gift by immediately over-working and thus ruining the benefit of the sabbatical.
 - d. Congregations should be ready for pastors to change during their sabbaticals. New priorities might be set. New ideas for ministry may have emerged. Unhelpful habits may have been discarded. Encourage the pastor to adopt these changes and stick to them!
4. The application of this policy will need to be flexible. Situations in local congregations may vary. Consult the Conference Pastor to discuss how a sabbatical might be possible in your church.

Planning for the Sabbatical

A sabbatical involves planning by the pastor and the church board. The pastor should present a proposal eight months in advance outlining the basic content of the sabbatical. This proposal will answer these questions:

- What is the overall goal or theme of the sabbatical? For example: During the sabbatical I will retreat from congregational responsibilities in order to rest and take studies to develop skills in mediating conflict.
- What specific activities will bring refreshment to the pastor during the sabbatical? Note that a sabbatical is not merely “time off” but should include a deliberate plan for doing activities that rekindle the soul.
- What specific courses, seminars, or workshops will the pastor take towards accomplishing the learning goal of the sabbatical?

- What specific kinds of prayer work or alternative service is the pastor going to engage in that will be refreshing?
- How will the pastor ensure that the sabbatical is legitimately *away* from congregational ministry and responsibility?

The pastor and the board will write up a sabbatical plan that includes the pastor's goals and the plan for covering the pastor's responsibilities during the sabbatical. It will also include the financial implications of the sabbatical for the church.

This plan should then be presented carefully and clearly to the congregation. In congregations where sabbaticals have not happened before, the congregation will need to be given time to ask questions and get used to the idea. It is important that the congregation be supportive, rather than suspicious, about the sabbatical and this requires sensitive processing. This is a gracious gift to the pastor, and it should feel that way.