

A Guide to Pastoral Sabbaticals

Rationale

The discussion of sabbaticals should begin, as with so many topics in church life, from the standpoint of the Great Commission. Every congregation, no matter how small, no matter where it exists, is called to “go, and make disciples...” No one will seriously dispute this. Now consider this provocative comment by Rick Warren: “A long pastorate does not *guarantee* a church will grow, but changing pastors every few years guarantees a church *won't* grow.” (The Purpose Driven Church, p.31, his emphasis.) Changing pastors every few years ensures that a driving vision and purpose will never take hold in a congregation. Pastors are, if not the originators of vision, certainly the carriers, spokespersons, and cheerleaders of vision. A revolving door on the pastors’ study means that the vision is constantly being altered, never fully understood, let alone embraced, by a congregation. We need long-term pastorates.

The question is, how do pastors keep their own vision clear and their passion alive? It has been observed by many that a pastor really only reaches his/her full stride in a new church after 5-7 years, but after that period of time the stresses of modern church life frequently have left the pastor running on empty spiritually and emotionally; the vision has been buried under a mountain of pastoral details, and the passion is spent.

Pastors frequently change churches at this point just to get the respite they need because there is no other recourse available to them. This does not serve the churches well. With the pastor gone, they have to put their energies into another pastoral search, another new beginning, another fumbling for vision for perhaps three to five years. If they are lucky, at the end of five years, they have the momentum they had when the previous pastor left.

Nor does the short-term pastorate serve pastors well either. Moving every four to six years means pastors never grow beyond their ability to minister for that period of time. They never get to develop the skills to lead truly missional churches.

How can churches keep pastors for the long term, so that they have a chance to become missionally effective in an enduring way? And how can pastors find the replenishment they need to continue to lead with purpose beyond the short term? The answer lies, at least in part, in the practice of a sabbatical. A sabbatical leave offers a pastor time to step back from the day-to-day pressures, to heal his/her own soul, recover vision, rethink the mission, research new possibilities to fulfill it, and return with a restored passion.

The main problem with this recommendation, of course, is the cost of a sabbatical to the church. Some might dismiss it out of hand as impractical. But the question should not be, “how can we afford this?” Rather it must be, “how can we not afford this?” If a long-term pastorate is key to a strong missional church, and if a sabbatical leave will ensure that a pastor is able to restore vision, recover energy, and return with a revitalized mind and heart, then surely we must find a way to afford this!

It can be argued that pastorates are getting longer again, and this is happening without sabbatical leaves. This is undoubtedly so. Probably the single most important reason for this change has been the working spouse. When the pastor was the only wage-earner, it was relatively easy for a pastor to move and re-establish elsewhere. Now moving is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for many pastors. So we have longer-term pastors. But what shape are these pastors in after five, six, or seven

years? How fresh is their vision? How strong their passion? Ask most pastors how they are doing after this period of time, and almost without fail they will confess they are running on empty, and are desperately in need of a break. Ask their churches, and often the churches will be muttering about it being time for the pastor to move on, because they feel the staleness of the pastor's soul, and assume that the pastor's best has already been given to them. What is needed is a temporary break, not a permanent one! The sabbatical will help the church retain the pastor it has come to trust and love, and the pastor will be renewed and refreshed and ready to lead the church to the next level.

What might a sabbatical look like?

Many congregations provide a plan for Ministerial Staff to have a sabbatical period after 5 to 10 years of service. Usually the sabbatical is a period of 3-12 months, away from all responsibilities of the church role. In our CBOQ experience, the most beneficial ones are in the 3-6 month range. Longer ones tend to create more challenges of coverage of responsibilities, as well as creating difficulty in re-engagement after the sabbatical. Some congregations are providing three months at the five year point in a ministry tenure, and another three at the seven year mark, for a total of six months in a seven year period.

In most cases, the congregation will pay for regular salary during the sabbatical. Some congregations also make funding available for extra costs associated with the sabbatical. In some cases, congregations establish a fund at the time of calling a pastor and pay into this fund as time goes by, so that when the sabbatical arrives, the accrued funds will help with the costs.

The congregation may engage an interim pastor for the period, although often this will be at a lesser time commitment than the regular pastor, e.g. a part-time interim, even if the pastor is full-time. Depending on when in the church year the sabbatical occurs and its length, the congregation may be able to manage with volunteers to cover areas of responsibility, or perhaps simply engaging pulpit supply.

During the sabbatical, the pastor will use the time for study, learning experiences, personal renewal and reflection. The best sabbaticals are built on a plan with some structure for how the time will be used. Sabbatical leaves should provide opportunity for the minister to learn and experience new things in ministry, whether through formal educational experiences or through a personally developed plan.

The pastor may be asked to submit a proposal in writing. Among the objective for sabbatical may be: further educational training, writing, a mission experience, or rest and renewal. At the end of the sabbatical a report may be requested.

The plan for a sabbatical leave should be processed with the Personnel team/coordinator (or whoever fills this function in the congregation) usually at least a year before the planned sabbatical, and preferably as part of the contract established when the pastor begins his/her service with the congregation.

It should also be noted that a sabbatical is not the same as a stress leave. Sabbaticals are intentional times, with a planned agenda to *prevent* the need for a stress leave. Stress leaves are a response provided when the pastor has reached a crisis stage of emotional, physical and spiritual depletion; its

goals are restored health and healing, and as such will employ different approaches such as counselling and medical help, with protracted periods of rest. They are also more open-ended, in that restored health must be achieved before the pastor returns to service. Given these differences, the approaches to setting up this sort of leave are significantly different. If your congregation and pastor are dealing with a stress leave situation, please contact the CBOQ Director of Leadership Development for coaching on best approaches.

Funding

Ideally, the church adds a sabbatical item to its budget each year. This fund accumulates to the point where it can adequately fund a sabbatical leave.

The pastor and the church each set aside a percentage of the annual salary to a sabbatical fund (e.g. 2%). This fund is held by the church and used to pay the pastor's salary while on sabbatical leave.

A multi-staffed church may be able to offer sabbatical leaves to its staff without incurring any additional cost by reallocating staff to provide the necessary coverage.