



Guidelines for a Sabbatical Leave for Clergy

The Ministerial Care Committee

The Central Conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church
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1) ***The Central Conference encourages its churches to provide a sabbatical leave*** at the conclusion of six years of ministry for purposes of personal and professional renewal. We suggest this be included in the terms of call.

2) ***What is a sabbatical?*** The sabbatical idea began in the Middle Ages when the doctors of the church, who were the university professors, needed one year in every seven to become students again and so refresh their spiritual calling. (“Sabbatical” refers to the seventh day of creation, the Sabbath.) The tradition of the sabbatical is alive and well in institutions of higher learning. It is being incorporated increasingly by churches for its pastors.

The idea that the teacher needs to become a student again and that the professional clergy once again need to become simply worshippers is still sound. “A sabbatical is simply a time given every seven years during which the Pastor/Teacher/Minister is required to become a student and worshipper for the purpose of refining and updating professional skills and refreshing his/her spiritual life and calling” (Norman G. Helm).

A sabbatical is not a vacation, nor is it a reward for good work, or simply a “perk” to keep the pastor happy. It is a time for personal renewal, for formal or informal study, and for professional re-tolling. The broadened time period allows the pastor time to pursue an extended course of a study in a seminary or some other graduate school or professional training center. It provides an opportunity for the minister to enter upon a self-directed program of reading, reflection and writing. Some pastors use the time to observe other churches as a way of learning lessons on how better to minister at home.

3) ***Why should pastors have sabbaticals?*** The variety of information and skills that the modern parish pastor is required to master or possess in some measure needs periodic updating. It is difficult for pastors to upgrade skills during the normal routine of parish ministry. It is difficult not because the pastor is busier than anyone else but because of the irregular nature of the parish task.

4) ***How long should the pastor be away?*** We suggest three months every seven years during which time the pastor receives full salary and benefits. The sabbatical is in addition to regular vacation. Provisions for an annual study leave to not apply during the sabbatical year.

5) ***How to take a sabbatical.*** Once the church and the pastor have made a mutual decision to provide for a sabbatical, the following outline of steps will get them underway.

I ***Determine the time parameters.*** The pastor in consultation with the Pastor-Parish Committee and the Church Council decide the length of the sabbatical, if that is not spelled out in the Letter of Call, and the best time for it

to be taken – with a clear distinction made between sabbatical and vacation. All decisions must be approved by a vote of the church council or board.

- II *Determine the financial arrangements.* As already mentioned, it is accepted practice to pay the pastor full salary and benefits during the sabbatical. Perhaps the church may want to assist the pastor financially when the sabbatical plan entails significant expenses. There will need to be some added money budgeted for pulpit supply during the year of the pastor's sabbatical.
- III *Make specific sabbatical plans.* The sabbatical should be carefully planned by the pastor – determining what is to be accomplished and how. Goals, objectives and strategies should be developed and submitted to the Pastor-Parish Committee and the Council.
- IV *Reporting to the congregation.* At the conclusion of the sabbatical, the pastor reports to the congregation on how the time was used and what was accomplished.
- V *Ethical implications associated with the sabbatical.*
 - A It is unethical for pastors to use the sabbatical to explore other job options, candidate for other pastoral positions, or accept a new church position within a year after their return from the sabbatical leave.
 - B It is equally important for a church not to use the sabbatical time to review its relationship with the pastor.

Conclusion: The sabbatical is an important event in the life of the pastor and the parish. If it is to be successful for all, the church must “own” the sabbatical. It is not healthy when the sabbatical is thought of simply as something the congregation “gives” pastors to do with as they please. Nor should the time be given grudgingly. The sabbatical is a church program and should, therefore, be carefully planned and funded as any other program of the church, and be designated to benefit the congregation as well as to enrich the pastor's ministry.