

WEST JERSEY PRESBYTERY POLICY ON SABBATICAL LEAVE

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DEFINITIONS

Sabbatical Leave for pastors and church educators is usually a planned time of spiritual enhancement for ministry and mission. Sabbatical Leave is an extension of the Biblical concept of a Sabbath day and a Sabbath year for renewal. It is both an act of faith that God will sustain us through a period of reflection and changed activity and an occasion for the recovery and renewal of vital energies.

Sabbatical Leave follows precedents in the academic community and among a growing number of private sector groups. This “extended time” is qualitatively different from vacation time or “days off”. It represents an opportunity for an individual to strategically disengage from regular and normal tasks so that ministry and mission may be viewed from a new perspective because of a planned program of focus. This opportunity for disengagement involves not only the pastor/educator, but also the family of the staff member (if applicable) and the rest of the congregation. The opportunities for reflection, study, growth, re-examination, and renewal are present for all three parties mentioned, and any well prepared Sabbatical Leave plan should include opportunities and responsibilities for each respective party involved. A Sabbatical Leave plan that only involves the pastor/educator is often only an extended study leave, not a Sabbatical Leave.

Each Sabbatical Leave situation is unique, but Sabbatical Leave generally should be considered for full-time pastors and educators serving churches, who have served in their present position for at least six (6) continuous years. The total exact lengths of leave need to be part of the overall negotiations. Generally, is it not advisable for a pastor to attempt to be absent from a congregation for much more than three (3) months. Although accrued vacation and study leave time may also be added to Sabbatical Leave, and thus extend the overall length of absence from the congregation to considerably beyond three months, the effect of such a prolonged separation should be considered carefully. The individual staffing situation will have a strong bearing on the *total* length of time recommended for a Sabbatical Leave. Churches with large staffs might be in a position to grant a longer term of leave than a church with a solo pastorate. It is further recommended that the Sabbatical Leave be built into the Call Process. Upon completion of the Sabbatical Leave, the incumbent Pastor or educator would be expected to continue to serve the same congregation for a period of at least four (4) times the length of the Sabbatical Leave plus the used vacation or study leave time. In addition, congregations may choose to limit the use of Sabbatical Leave to one staff person per year, in those churches with larger staffs.

As the plans for a Sabbatical Leave are advanced, it is also recommended that the congregation and the staff member involved (pastor/educator) enter into a contractual agreement regarding the terms of the Sabbatical Leave and how to compensate if all of the obligations are not fulfilled, such as the staff member not returning to active service to the congregation.

PLANNING FOR SABBATICAL LEAVE

The Sabbatical Leave plan should have two basic sections. The first part should have a set of goals and activities for the pastor/educator. The second part should be a set of goals and activities for the session and/or congregation. While the first part of the plan may be developed by the person taking the Sabbatical Leave, the second part should be developed in conjunction with session and other congregation members. During the planning, it is important to recognize who will be affected by the sabbatical Leave (i.e. the pastor/educator, the family (if applicable), the congregation, interim or temporary staff) and how each might be affected. A good Sabbatical Plan will not just take into account how the sabbatical will affect these individuals/groups, but will also allow for some growth and or renewal on their part during the time of leave. A good Sabbatical Leave is an opportunity to develop and test Lay training and leadership.

To be eligible for a Sabbatical Leave, the Pastor/Educator shall present, in writing, to the Church session for its approval, a program or plan of proposed activity for the Sabbatical Leave at least six (6) months prior to the proposed start of the Sabbatical Leave. This program of activity and meditation shall normally include a detailed description of the plan, the goals to be achieved, and the expected end product(s), together with a personal statement as to why this Sabbatical Leave would be valuable for both the pastor/educator and the congregation. In some instances, more unstructured plans may be more appropriate, as specific circumstances and individuals are considered. However, in most cases, the most successful experiences with Sabbatical Leaves have been achieved when detailed planning has occurred that includes the pastor/educator, the family (if any) of the pastor/educator, and the remaining church staff and congregation.

Upon approval by the session, the Sabbatical Leave Plan shall be forwarded to the West Jersey Presbytery Committee on Ministry for its review and recommendation to Presbytery for its approval, with due consideration for the uniqueness of the Sabbatical Leave being considered. Included in the plan will be the church's plan for pastor/educator services during the period of the Sabbatical Leave. Following initial approval, any significant changes to the Sabbatical Leave Plan shall also be approved by the Session and WJP's Committee on Ministry.

At the completion of the Sabbatical Leave, the Pastor/Educator should present to the next regular meeting of the church session, a written report of activities and findings. This report will also be forwarded to the Presbytery's Committee on Ministry immediately following the Session Meeting at which it is presented.

FUNDING

The employing church will continue the pastor/educator salaries, pension, major medical benefits, book allowance, and, at the direction of the session, auto and continuing education allowances at the same level as those in effect at the time prior to the commencement of Sabbatical Leave.

The employing church will also contract for substitute pastor/educator services during the period of Sabbatical Leave. Although Sabbatical Leave may appear to be a heavy burden for the local

congregation to bear, it is crucial for the congregation and session to realize the long-term benefits that the congregation will reap from the granting of a Sabbatical Leave. For example, ministers/educators who have the opportunity to examine issues of professional growth and development as ministers within existing pastorates are likely to stay more years in a particular call. The Sabbatical Leave provision also conveys a sense of support and caring on the part of the calling church. It offers an incentive to both ministers and educators to commit to and think in terms of longer years of service in a particular call.

Clergy, churches, and presbytery are encouraged to set aside funds each year so that resources will be available during the time of Sabbatical Leave. Those churches that would have financial problems in providing for the Sabbatical Leave could consult with Presbytery. In addition, those churches that could not secure lay leadership during times of Sabbatical Leave might consider using elders trained as Lay Pastors or Associate Pastors who might be willing to preach on single Sundays without honorariums.

Note: The Louisville Institute, a Lilly Endowment Program housed at the Louisville Seminary, provides study grants for pastoral leaders.

LEAVE TAKING

A proper Sabbatical involves a real “leave taking”, and it is recommended that this is done in a formal manner, much as we send commissioners to Synod or General Assembly. This involves everyone in a sense of a start of a journey, of which it is. It also helps to ensure that everyone has been properly prepared for the separation, and that all parties have a real chance to grow and renew. This can’t happen in an atmosphere of expected weekly “check-ins” or updates. The more successful leave taking process will include a transfer of necessary day to day operating information, similar to an operating manual for the congregation. Once the formal leave taking has occurred, it is recommended that a few days of “down” time be scheduled prior to the start of any travel, training, or other leave activities. Many experts believe that this sort of “cleansing of the mental palate” helps to prepare for a more successful learning experience.

RE-ENTRY

Likewise, it is highly recommended that the returning person schedule a few days extra to relax prior to re-entry into the relationship with the congregation. Time is needed to fully absorb and understand what has just been experienced, and it may be too soon to attempt to explain it well to others.

Upon re-entry, it is strongly suggested that the pastor/educator and the congregation share with each other the details of the Sabbatical Leave as well as reflections on its value and benefit. The re-entry process provides a great opportunity to reflect upon the benefits that resulted from the Sabbatical Leave. Such benefits may include:

Discovering the strength of lay leadership, heretofore under-utilized;

New understandings of concepts of mission between clergy and congregation;

Reaffirmation of calling, on the part of clergy and congregation, with both being reinvigorated and rededicated to the work of God's people.

The ideal result would be for the congregation to see this period of time not just as the Pastor's/Educator's Sabbatical Leave, but also as the congregation's Sabbatical Leave. The sense of renewal cannot be restricted just to the pastor/educator. This is a sign of only partial success. A truly successful Sabbatical Leave should result in a sense of renewal for the pastor/educator, their family (if applicable), and the congregation.

Note: While many books on Sabbatical Leave are available, we recommend the following:

Clergy Renewal, The Alban Guide to Sabbatical Planning by Bullock and Bruesehoff is a concise volume available from the Presbytery Office.