



The Pastoral Sabbatical Principles, Guidelines, and Recommendations

The renowned leadership guru Peter Drucker was widely quoted as saying the nation's four most difficult leadership positions are:

1. President of the United States
2. President of a major university
3. CEO of a hospital
4. Pastor of a local church¹

And, Drucker added, not necessarily in that order.²

The Utterly Unique Demands of Pastoral Ministry

The role of pastor stands as one of the most distinctly demanding leadership positions in the world. Pastors shoulder a combination of pressures and responsibilities few comprehend. They must exhibit proficiency in a myriad of different professions combined into one: corporate CEO, counselor, teacher, accountant, facilities manager, personnel director, development director, compliance officer, outreach coordinator, writer, chief of staff, and others. All of this rests atop the role's primary responsibilities: following Christ, studying God's word, praying, shepherding, equipping, and discerning God's direction for the flock entrusted to their care and oversight.

A local church pastor endures all the universal challenges of leadership: risk aversion, change resistance, heightened criticism. But he also faces the added hurdles of leading a

¹ D.J. Chuang, "What Peter Drucker Said About Pastors and Churches," <http://djchuang.com/2014/peter-drucker-said-pastors-churches/>, 2014.

² Dan Chum, "Pastors Often Succumb to Job Burnout Due to Stress, Low Pay," <http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2006/Nov/18/il/FP611180330.html>, 2006).

chronically underfunded, predominantly volunteer organization toward a largely thankless task, all while opposed by supernaturally-powered evil.³

Pastors tend to suffer in silence as they endure these demands. They understand that service and sacrifice are what they signed up for, part of Christ's call to leaders in his kingdom's work—the invitation to “die to self.” This commitment, coupled with the understanding that suffering is intrinsic to full discipleship, historically leads pastors to either deny the effects of ministry's cumulative weight or presume it to be a noble sacrifice they should endure without complaint.

But these costs, if left unaddressed, take a significant toll that eventually can evidence itself in debilitating effects:

- 75% of pastors report being “highly stressed” or “extremely stressed.”
- 90% feel fatigued and worn out every week.
- 91% have experienced some form of burnout.
- 50% feel so discouraged they would leave their ministry if they could, but can't find another job.³

Consequently, the rate of clinical depression, loneliness, moral failure, addictive behavior, divorce, and suicide have all spiked among pastors. Burnout rates and stress-related illness in clergy rank among the highest of all professions.⁴ Only one in 20 who enter pastoral ministry will retire from it.⁵

In recent decades, American churches and denominations have thankfully begun to recognize this reality, resulting in a resurgence in the provisions of soul care and personal refreshment offered to pastors. The pastoral sabbatical represents one of the most proven and effective of the resources being utilized to invest in the holistic health of spiritual leaders.

Defining the Pastoral Sabbatical

A working definition of a pastoral sabbatical:

A pastoral sabbatical is a season of full separation from vocational ministry responsibilities that affords a spiritual leader time and opportunity for physical, emotional, and spiritual rest, recuperation, refreshment, reflection, recentering, revitalization, repurposing, and recommitment prior to resuming the functions of the position.

³ Bill Gaultiere, “Pastor Stress Statistics,” <http://www.soulshepherding.org/2009/11/pastors-under-stress/>, 2009.

⁴ These already alarming numbers have increased exponentially since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic (<https://careynieuwhof.com/5-shocking-realities-about-the-real-state-of-pastor-burnout/>).

⁵ H.B. London and Neil B. Wiseman, *Pastors at Greater Risk* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2003), 86.

Pastoral sabbaticals, though not explicitly prescribed in Scripture, reflect the biblical principles of sabbath rest (Ex. 20:8; Deut. 5:12) and allowing fruit-bearing environments to occasionally lie fallow for a season to replenish their health and vitality (Ex. 23:11; Lev. 25:3-4). The Bible often sets forth a one-in-seven rest rhythm of days, years, and even eras.⁶ Applying this rhythm to those bearing the unique load of ministry leadership is a natural extension of the principle as a means to both reducing the risk of burnout and failure, and promoting sustained health for those serving the family of God.

Distinctions: What a Pastoral Sabbatical is not

Because a sabbatical carries a very specific, proactive purpose, it should be distinguished from other provisions sometimes afforded those serving in ministry.

- A pastoral sabbatical is not a *vacation*. It includes prescriptive elements and investments in the pastor's inner health, extending beyond simple rest and recreation. It is more than a reward for years of service; it is an investment for healthy years of service to come (*note: it is strongly recommended that a sabbatical not replace the vacation provision in its given year but be provided in addition to normal vacation time*).
- A pastoral sabbatical is not a *study break*. Shorter times away to plan and prepare for teaching series or to renew church vision are a recommended provision especially for teaching/lead pastors, but should be seen as a distinct benefit given by the church (*note: guidelines for a study break provision can be found at <https://fecministries.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Establishing-an-Annual-Study-Break.pdf>*).
- A pastoral sabbatical is not an *educational/degree-seeking provision*. While the initiation of such a pursuit may be something a church considers including in a particular pastor's sabbatical on an individual basis, pastoral sabbaticals differ from academic ones in that the goal is not primarily research, publishing, or degree advancement, but holistic replenishment.
- A pastoral sabbatical is not a *leave of absence*. Churches sometimes choose to offer an extended time away to a pastor who is in crisis or dealing with a debilitating personal/familial issue. Leaves of absence are likewise occasionally utilized as a tool for addressing professional or personal deficiencies as part of a process to determine whether the individual can remain in his current role. A sabbatical is a preventative measure rather than a remedial or punitive one.

In contrast to these provisions, a sabbatical creates sufficient space and time for full decompression from the stresses and demands of shepherding while supplying intentional elements of soul-replenishment, self-reflection and adjustment, and re-envisioning of both the pastor's personal calling to ministry and the ministry he currently leads. Simultaneously it serves as a safeguard against the slow drift toward internal decay that so often manifests itself in unhealthy patterns and even disqualifying behavior.

⁶ The Year of Jubilee followed seven cycles of sabbatical years—Lev. 25:8-13.

Suggested Provisions of a Pastoral Sabbatical

The structure and provisions of pastoral sabbaticals vary widely among churches, denominations and networks. Because no specific scriptural prescription exists, each situation may present its own set of foci, engagements, involvements, and activities. In terms of basic recommendations, research done by the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches (FEC) suggests the following as foundational recommendations for inclusion in any pastoral sabbatical.

1). A length of at least one full “season”—at least 3 months

Some ministries provide even longer sabbatical terms—6, 9, and 12 month-long sabbaticals are not uncommon. Context, church/staff size, ministry scope, timing, and other factors all can contribute to discern proper length of the sabbatical. But in order to provide sufficient time for full decompression and resetting of essential health components, no less than 3 consecutive months is recommended.

2). Distinct nomenclature

To clarify the specific purposes and intentions of a sabbatical for the church body and others, it is recommended that separate time-away provisions like those mentioned earlier—study breaks, extended vacation times, personal days, educational or conference times, speaking away time, or leaves of absence—refrain from using the term “sabbatical” (or even “mini-sabbatical”) to ensure the differentiation. This can help mitigate speculation and gossip that disciplinary or intercessional motivation is behind the time away. It also helps relieve church members of fear that the pastor’s job is in danger or that he may not return to the role once the sabbatical is completed.

3). Continuation of the pastor’s full salary and benefits through the sabbatical

The sabbatical provision should not require reduction of or interruption to the pastor’s salary/benefits package. It is counterproductive to the sabbatical’s purposes if its implementation creates further stress or sacrifice on the part of the pastor.

4). Additional financial coverage for use in the sabbatical’s key provisions

One or more of the sabbatical’s planned provisions that require fees, expenses, or registration costs—such as counseling, marriage or professional retreats, conferences, courses, spiritual formation contracts, or perhaps a vacation supplement—can be built into the coverage package paid by the church. While the amount of such provision varies, most current examples range from \$2000 to \$5000. It is recommended that at least one provision of the sabbatical—approved in advance by the church’s leadership—be covered in full. The exact amount of this provision can be set by the church’s governing board on the basis of either researching total cost of one provision or determining a maximum total that can be spread among multiple provisions (*note: it is recommended that, should the provision be earmarked for a specific event such as a conference or retreat, all related expenses including travel and lodging costs be factored into the provision*).

5). *Formalized Frequency*

It is recommended that the official governing board of the church formalize the provision's frequency for its full-time pastoral staff. The majority of ministries researched by FEC borrow the biblical rhythm of a 7-year repeating cycle, though a 5-year cycle is also common. It is further recommended that when a pastor is hired by the church, a sabbatical be built into both the employment agreement and the calendar (as well as the budget), to be taken after the first 7 years in the position and repeating every 7 years thereafter. Governing leadership can discern whether previous uninterrupted ministry in the pastor's former position(s) can be factored into the initial count toward the first sabbatical. Churches new to the concept of pastoral sabbaticals whose pastors have already served in the role for more than 7 years are encouraged to initiate the provision as early as possible.

Suggested Components of an Effective Pastoral Sabbatical

Because no universal template exists for the flow and emphases of pastoral sabbaticals, a spectrum of foci and provisions can be found among current examples. The following recommended breakdown should not be considered universal, nor should it be seen as strictly linear or regimented. It rather represents a natural progression of the three foci most consistently reported as effective in pastoral sabbaticals.

1st third: Decompression (Rest, Diversion, & Refreshment)

Studies reveal that "decompression" from the pace and sustained weight of responsibility pastors carry requires a significant period in order to be fully realized. At least one month of full separation is said to be necessary before a pastor isn't keenly aware of what is happening on that particular day in the church's ministry or feeling the recurring pressures of weekly routine and monthly schedules connected to their job.

It is therefore commonly recommended that the initial month (or more) of the sabbatical be earmarked for non-activity, free from specific focus (besides possible family vacation/travel), with complete separation from the day-to-day workings of the church. Some travel and new rhythms are recommended here (perhaps a combination of trips alone and with spouse or family) to give the pastor a full break from the surroundings associated with the church's ministry.

It is strongly suggested that the pastor be freed from the expectation to be productive or proactive toward professional growth during this segment. He can be urged to simply unplug, perhaps sleep in, see new things, go on excursions if possible. He can be encouraged to engage in or start a hobby. He can take advantage of free or low-cost retreat centers (see "Resources" section below) for time alone or with his spouse or family. He can be with God on a personal, individual-focused level rather than one connected to program preparation or message study. He can be urged not to think about ministry or

professional improvement during this initial segment. The goal here is to rest and unwind even to the point of boredom.

2nd third: Spiritual/Personal Renewal

The second third of the sabbatical can move toward intentional investment in the inner life of the pastor, including participation in guided input designed to enhance spiritual, relational, or personal health. As previously mentioned, it is recommended that the sabbatical include at least one formal, directed experience to develop an area of need—whether personal counseling, marriage counseling or conference/retreat, a spiritual formation retreat/conference/cohort, or perhaps the start (or continuation) of an educational pursuit.

The governing body of the church can work in consultation with the pastor to discern the area most preferable for such an investment, and to select the best option for the pastor's participation. Regardless of what formal outlets may be included, the sabbatical needs to create significant time and space where the pastor can focus on plowing up his heart, strengthening personal intimacy with the Father, purging his mind/body/heart from sin, and rediscovering his "first love" to whatever degree is necessary.

3rd third: Professional Growth, Ministry Recalibration, and Re-entry

The final third of the sabbatical can be dedicated to a combination of professional growth specific to his ministry, course-correction of work and personal life habits to institute, and re-envisioning of the church's direction itself. Self-reflection and retrenching of schedule and pace can be involved in this focus, including answering key questions about the way the pastor will stay healthy when resuming ministry activities, such as:

- How do I want to lead my family, my marriage, and my personal life differently?
- What do I want to change about my pace, priorities, focus, responsibilities, etc.?
- What do I want to eliminate from my time and energies, if possible?
- What do I want to introduce to my routine and focus, if possible?
- What skills do I most need to enhance to become more effective in my role?
- What area of my knowledge/learning do I need to strengthen?
- Where does God want to take us collectively as a church?
- What do I sense should be the church's priorities for the next season?

It is recommended that the pastor use the last couple weeks of the sabbatical to re-engage with the church's governing board to review and process these reflections, and to determine together what changes, if any, should be implemented as a result. The pastor can also use the time to reconnect with ministry staff and team leaders for briefing and dialogue about new plans and changes that emerge as a result of the sabbatical.

A Suggested Process for Designing, Preparing, and Implementing a Pastoral Sabbatical

The healthiest, most effective pastoral sabbaticals are those in which all parties recognize and affirm their importance and treat their preparation and implementation as a growth opportunity for the entire church body.

While not exhaustive, this flow of key tasks, steps, and correlating recommendations represents a way those planning a sabbatical can ensure a natural, seamless ministry flow and church-wide positive participation. It is strongly suggested that this process be approached as a joint effort between the church's governing body and the participating pastor.

1. Affirm the need with a unified commitment

The leadership board of the church needs to be united in its commitment to offer a sabbatical to its pastor(s). Allow time for research, education and dialogue on the subject as necessary. The FEC office stands ready to offer data and recommendations if desired.

Recommendation:

- *Make the establishment of a sabbatical provision a formal, official act of the church's governing board, recorded in the church's bylaws or employee handbook and announced to the church's membership.*

2. Determine the main purposes of this particular sabbatical

The possible goals and purposes to include in pastoral sabbaticals are many and varied. Some mixture of rest, re-centering, and re-envisioning are most prevalent, but other options include writing, participation in a distinct mission or ministry project, initiating a "bucket list" life experience, reading and research, and training/equipping.

The church's leadership does well to consider its specific environment, vision, and culture, as well as the personality, tendencies, and station of life of the pastor, and then individualize the specific purposes of this particular sabbatical for this distinct pastor.

Recommendations:

- *Make the list of purposes short and specific. Too many objectives can overwhelm the pastor, who can feel pressure to complete the "assignments."*
- *See the "Components of an Effective Pastoral Sabbatical" section above for a recommended, default breakdown of 3 primary foci.*

3. Determine the length of the sabbatical

Myriad factors can have a bearing on the total length of the sabbatical, including the presence, skill-sets, and availability of other paid staff, the pastor's level of involvement in daily operations of the church, the pastor's family dynamic and needs, and available funds and resources. Lengths of sabbaticals among polled samples range from 1-12 months, though it is strongly recommended that any provision less than 3 months not be labelled a

“sabbatical” for reasons delineated earlier. The most common pastoral sabbatical length is 3 or more months.

Recommendation:

- *Grant a minimum of one full “season” (3 months, or 13 weeks).*

4. Discern the optimal season for the sabbatical

Pastoral sabbaticals are most commonly scheduled in or around the summer months due to increased opportunities for fair weather excursions and outlets for the pastor and his family. The oftentimes reduced programming that churches plan for the summer months and the flexibility afforded summer breaks in school calendars also contribute to this trend. Consideration should be given to unique programming and cultural rhythms in the church’s specific demographic and climate. In many places, more opportune seasons of the calendar year exist.

Recommendation:

- *Consult the pastor’s spouse and, when possible, allow the pastor himself to determine the preferable season within the parameters determined by the church’s governing board.*

5. Produce a formal written policy (if desired)

Establishing a brief but clear church policy for pastoral sabbaticals can help with communication to the congregation, ensure pastoral staff are aware of the provision and its details, and serve as a defining document in case of confusion.

Recommendations:

- *Include definitive details about eligibility, length, regularity, financial provision, and purpose.*
- *See the Appendix for samples.*

6. Research available resources and opportunities

Once the sabbatical’s primary goals and foci have been established, explore recommended and available outlets/resources/events for possible inclusion in the sabbatical’s structure. As previously discussed, consider building at least one formal resource—such as a pastor’s retreat center, marriage or leadership conference, guided spiritual formation retreat, specialized counseling/coaching, or destination vacation—into the plan.

Recommendations:

- *Work in consultation with the pastor and his spouse to assess which type of formal resource would be most beneficial given the pastor’s current station of life, personal needs, and desires.*
- *Include self-administered assessment tools as part of the pre-sabbatical discernment process for identifying area(s) the pastor most needs or wants to develop. Personality profiles, marriage assessments, and professional/career assessments are all readily available. Contact the FEC office if recommendations are desired.*

- For a list of active locations/ministries offering free or discounted retreat settings for pastors, see <https://fecministries.org/resources-all/soul-care-provisions/self-care/>.

7. Schedule the dates

Once the best season and length for the sabbatical have been determined, formalize its official start and end dates.

Recommendations:

- *Avoid making the end date just before a Sunday when the pastor would be expected to resume preaching, lest he feel compelled to cut short the sabbatical to initiate sermon preparation.*
- *Set the dates at least six months in advance to allow for communication, organization, and planning both by the pastor and the church's ministry leaders.*

8. Communicate with the congregation

Utilize multiple communication outlets to inform and educate the congregation about the coming sabbatical, and to celebrate it as a provision of the church's commitment to the health and longevity of its pastor.

Recommendations:

- *Allow most if not all public announcements of the sabbatical to be done by someone other than the pastor himself so as not to put him in a position of sounding self-serving, and to show that the sabbatical's initiation comes from the church's collective leadership.*
- *Make ongoing, consistent announcements through the months leading up to the sabbatical dates, with a tone of calling on the congregation to rally around the season as an opportunity to step up into increased levels of commitment to give and serve. Emphasize the priesthood of all believers as part of this vision-casting.*

9. Map out the sabbatical's flow, schedule, and anchor events

Have the pastor outline the flow and calendar of the sabbatical, using the designated primary goals as a guide. Include the selected anchor events (scheduled travel, conference/retreats, etc.) and any specific times of focus and activity such reading/study, ministry visits, etc. Allow the pastor to take the lead on this, then present it to the governing board for affirmation or adjustment and approval.

Recommendations:

- *Consult with the pastor's spouse about family routines, scheduling, special activities, preferred months, etc.*
- *Consider including specific books to be read, spiritual formation practices to be explored, and mentors to be consulted.*

10. Set the budget

The challenge of funding a sabbatical is one of the most common reasons churches decide they aren't able to offer one. Assuming the church will continue the pastor's salary package uninterrupted during the sabbatical, a list of other costs to fund the project should be compiled and built into the church budget. Those additional funds may include: a set amount to cover registration to one or more conferences, retreats, or training centers; honorariums for pulpit supply; contribution toward a special family vacation or outing; and materials and equipment (such as a book allowance, burner phone for emergency contact, etc.).

Recommendations:

- *Be generous; this is a chance to affirm and bless the pastor.*
- *Build in full coverage of at least one larger provision (retreat, conference, nicer vacation destination, marriage getaway, course or seminar, contracting a spiritual director, etc.).*
- *If the church's budget process/guidelines allow for giving to special projects, establish one for the sabbatical and announce it as a way individuals can give "above and beyond" to bless their pastor.*
- *Research and apply for any and all grants made available for pastoral sabbaticals. Sources for these are always changing, and applying well in advance of the sabbatical dates is strongly advised. Ask for volunteers who have experience in grant-writing to help with the process.*

11. Inventory all ministry leadership coverage responsibilities

Pastors tend to oversee and execute far more recurring responsibilities than are listed in their job descriptions. An exhaustive list of tasks they perform, teams/projects/events they oversee, and meetings they lead should be compiled, along with bullet-points of specific details involved in each.

Recommendations:

- *Avoid planning big extras or new initiatives during the sabbatical.*
- *Use this exercise as an opportunity to quietly discontinue unnecessary routines or obsolete programs the pastor currently is maintaining.*

12. Assign ministry coverage "point persons"

This is where the church leadership has an opportunity to make a pastoral sabbatical a tool to heighten lay involvement and the value of the priesthood of all believers in the life of the church. Ministry team leaders and assistants can be asked to step further into the oversight of the team, and to deputize new helpers. The congregation can be challenged and invited to live out Ephesians 4's principle that the pastor is an equipper, and the body does the work of the ministry. For each recurring task listed in #11, either the pastor, another staff member, or a member of the church's governing board can be assigned to line up one or more individuals who will take on that task during the pastor's absence.

Recommendations:

- *Divide the list of ministries needing coverage and parcel out the assignment of securing coverage point persons for them so that the responsibility does not fall*

entirely on the pastor. Among the most common mistakes churches make in providing a sabbatical is that the mountain of responsibilities loaded onto the pastor to prepare for it creates an even deeper deficit of burnout before he begins it.

- *Ensure that follow-up happens after coverage is initially assigned. Additional equipping and resourcing may be necessary, and unfortunately balls are often dropped and people bail out at the last minute, sometimes without communication. Create checkpoints to guard against failed completion of the tasks.*

13. Line up coverage of main Sunday teaching/messages

Sunday teaching responsibility is often the most visible and noticeable void felt during a pastor's sabbatical. And because the responsibility for delivering God's Word is so high, this area warrants special attention and planning. It also provides a significant opportunity.

If a teaching team is already in place, that team can easily parcel out coverage of the Sundays affected by the sabbatical among themselves, guided by the pastor prior to his departure. If the pastor is generally the church's only preacher, he can take the lead in lining up pulpit supply for the affected Sundays, soliciting help from the church's governing board, the FEC office, and other outlets.

The pastor can discern whether the Sunday messages affected by the sabbatical are best covered by a particular series or theme, a set of stand-alone messages, or a creative combination. This also presents an opportunity to identify members of the body who show indications of possessing the gift of teaching—even if they've never prepared or delivered a Sunday sermon before—and to give the opportunity to develop and use that gift.

Because one of the qualifications of biblical eldership is "able to teach," it is strongly recommended that each of the church's elder team members take at least one Sunday during the span of the sabbatical (*note: because teaching is one of the general responsibilities of elders, it is suggested that they do so without remuneration in keeping with the volunteer status of all gifts being used to serve within the church body*). Guest speakers, staff members, video messages or series, worship-and-prayer mornings (without formal Bible teaching), highlighted partner ministries, or other creative presentations can also be utilized during this time.

Recommendations:

- *Consider dedicating the first Sunday message of the sabbatical to be a call and challenge to the congregation toward honoring their pastor (with specific instructions for not contacting him for ministry needs) and stepping up to serve and unite as a body to flourish during this season (the FEC office team can often provide a guest teacher for this role).*
- *The FEC office can help with occasional pulpit supply through the sabbatical's weeks.*

- *The pastor's network of friends and fellow pastors is a good source of guest speakers.*
- *Produced video series can be a surprisingly effective tool to use for a portion of the Sundays. Sources like RightNow Media have a plethora of options.*
- *Honorariums are appropriate for outside guests asked to preach. Be sure to build this into the budgeting plan.*
- *It is wise to always have one elder or staff leader prepared with a message they can deliver on short notice as a backup plan should an unexpected cancellation occur.*

14. Set up protocols for contact/communication

Parishioners (and church board members) can be notorious for ignoring the boundaries of sabbaticals. Everyone tends to think the “rules” about not contacting the pastor don’t apply to them because their need is “special” or they’re “not bothering” him with their question or conversation. True decompression and separation from the weight of pastoral responsibilities almost always necessitates full closure (and redirection) of the typical avenues by which church attendees contact their pastor.

The church’s leadership can establish a clear plan for how communication happens with the pastor, to guard him from unnecessary contact during his time of refreshment. This most often includes temporary phone/text adjustments, and email and social media blockage. The pastor’s spouse is a key component of this setup (see below).

Recommendations:

- *Set up an out of office autoreply for all the pastor's church email accounts and ask him to turn off his mail app for those accounts. Emails can be re-directed to the church office or a designated staff member or church elder, who relays pertinent information or requests to those designated to cover the corresponding appropriate ministry area.*
- *Provide a burner phone to the pastor for the duration of the sabbatical, the number of which is given out exclusively to his family and perhaps one church board representative (for emergencies). Have him shut off his regular phone or set it not to receive incoming calls or texts. Have him change his outgoing voicemail message (including his church phone mailbox, if one exists) to reflect the dates he will not be receiving calls, and to turn off his voicemail on that phone.*
- *Invite the pastor's wife to be the “gatekeeper” of information reaching her husband. A single governing board member can then be designated to contact her in case of emergency or to pass along information they feel the pastor would want or need to know. The pastor's spouse can discern what is conveyed and what is redirected. Likewise, any information deemed necessary by the pastor to relay to church leadership can be done through his spouse.*
- *Ask the pastor not to post to social media during his sabbatical, and to consider turning off notifications or reception of IMs/DMs during his time away.*

15. Set up protocols for emergencies

Many so-called “emergencies” prove not to be such when the one declaring them is redirected or asked to explain their situation. However, truly critical situations do arise, and the church’s leadership does well to have a contingency plan in place in case one emerges during the sabbatical. A simple list of whom to call, who will take the lead in response, and what will be done to address the situation can be generated prior to the sabbatical through a cooperative effort of the pastor and governing board. The list can include the most common emergency categories such as death or serious accident, moral failure, criminal behavior affecting the church property or people, allegations of misconduct, or significant divisiveness within the church.

Recommendations:

- *Appoint a “point person” from the staff or governing board who will serve as the clearing house to whom potential emergency situations are directed. He or she can then discern the proper next channels for responding.*
- *In situations where the point person senses the pastor may need or want to be informed of the situation, he or she can consult the official board, and if the consensus is to inform the pastor, the designated contact person can communicate with the pastor’s spouse directly with the news. She can then relay the information, and they can discern together what further steps the pastor should take.*

16. Produce and sign a formal agreement form (optional)

If a church’s governing board feels it is necessary for the sake of clarity and accountability, a formal agreement document can be generated that spells out the eligibility requirements and provisions of the sabbatical, as well as any expectations on the pastor upon returning. Some sabbatical “contracts” include language that the pastor agrees to remain in his position at the church for at least one or sometimes two years after completion of the sabbatical, and that should he resign prior to the agreed-upon time will be responsible to refund part or all the expenses incurred by the church for his sabbatical provision.

Recommendations:

- *Formal protocols requiring recipients of a benefit to repay funds expended for their professional development if they do not remain in the position for a designated period afterward reflect American corporate/business patterns that can risk violating the ethos of trust and unconditional giving that churches prefer to function under. Think carefully through the motives and necessities for incorporating such conditions before including them.*
- *If desired by the official board, generate a form that is signed and dated by both the pastor and representative of the board.*

17. Plan a public “commissioning” date

Rather than see a sabbatical as a time for circling the wagons and surviving until the pastor’s return, the congregation needs to be envisioned to view it as an energizing gift both to the pastor and to themselves. A healthy, refreshed pastor is worth every investment, and the time he is on sabbatical affords a chance for the church to stretch

their faith, strengthen their spiritual muscles, and see God do new things to reach people and advance his kingdom through them.

The final Sunday before the sabbatical's start is a natural time to commission the season by praying over the pastor, giving instructions to the congregation about how the church will function in his absence, and perhaps presenting him with a gift for use in his time away.

Recommendation:

- *Use the commissioning to create a clear demarcation/starting date after which the congregation knows the pastor is "off-limits" for contact. Clarify to whom questions, needs, and communications should be directed during the sabbatical, and articulate a clear ending date so parishioners can be clear when the pastor will again be available.*

18. Set instructions for re-entry communications, reflection, and reporting

The pace of re-entry from the sabbatical may be as important in the process as the sabbatical itself. Attempting to shift from 0 to 60 can strip away the fresh growth of new rhythms and perspectives the pastor has been developing during his time away. Allow him time to ramp up, even if he's eager to jump in with both feet. If the pastor has been asked to chronicle or journal his thoughts during the sabbatical, set a time when his reflections and ideas can be processed with the governing board of the church, the staff, and ministry leaders.

Treating the return of the pastor as a reunion and celebration moment can give the church—especially those who may have begun attending during his absence—an opportunity to embrace him and express their readiness to move forward in the next chapter of the church's ministry.

Recommendations:

- *Consider having the pastor be present but not expected to teach at his first service back in the saddle, affording him a slower on-ramp of resuming that responsibility.*
- *Resist the temptation to ask the pastor to give a life-changing report of major self-revelations or "what God revealed to him" while he was away. Often the fruit of a sabbatical is not found so much in profundities or powerful epiphanies (see #4 in the "Practical Questions & Considerations" section below) but in the undetectable trickle-charge of refreshment that will only reveal itself in the long-term perspectives he carries with him through his ongoing journey.*

Practical Questions & Considerations

1. What about the spouse/children?

Among the biggest challenges sabbaticals present is the question of how the pastor's spouse and family are supposed to adjust and participate in the altered lifestyle. Just because a pastor is away from the church ministry doesn't mean the spouse should be

obliged to join him. Oftentimes she does not desire or need that, and unplugging from her own community can be counterproductive.

No definitive guidelines exist for navigating this dynamic, but the church's leadership should work closely with the pastor and his spouse to address the question in the context of their particular station of life and preferences. If the spouse desires to participate significantly in the sabbatical, the church can provide coverage of whatever ministry responsibilities she holds as well. If not, they should address how they will guide the congregation to interface with the spouse in a healthy manner while preserving the separation being afforded the pastor.

2. Where is the line between friendships and parishioners? Is the pastor to suspend his church-based community connections (small group, men's ministry, personal interactions with church friends, etc.) during the sabbatical?

Similar to #1, this question is important to address in advance of the sabbatical. Many pastors do not have an environment within the church where they engage in fully-authentic community given their dual role of shepherd to the flock and sheep within the flock, but some do. If the pastor desires to stay connected in the "koinonia" based outlets of the church during his sabbatical, ensure he is not responsible to lead such groups but only participate as a member of them. If he unplugs entirely, urge him to seek out peer community among fellow pastors or other outlets during that season so that he doesn't isolate entirely from environments that provide life-giving fellowship.

3. What if this significantly affects finances or attendance?

Church boards often approach sabbaticals with heightened fear that sustained time away by their leader will result in the sheep scattering or financial giving waning. While the great majority of churches that have chronicled the effects of sabbaticals report this fear to be unfounded, the possibility still exists.

This provides the governing board an opportunity to exercise the kind of faith they often call on parishioners to enact. Prayer, planning, and communication are all pivotal parts of navigating this challenge well. Build in clear requests to the congregation to commit themselves to faithful attendance and giving through the sabbatical, and initiate these requests prior to its commencement. Report and discuss significant drop-offs with the church body if necessary. Giving and attendance numbers tend to ebb and flow during various seasons of the year regardless of the pastor's presence (especially during summer months), so don't panic if those fluctuations happen during the sabbatical. Anticipate good rebounds after the season completes.

4. What should (and shouldn't) be the metric for measuring success of the sabbatical?

The fruit of a pastoral sabbatical should be measured in a fundamentally different way than provisions found in corporate and business settings. In those realms training courses, conferences, and other time-away perks are generally viewed through the lens of increased productivity, longevity, job-performance, industry knowledge, or corporate advancement.

By contrast, the greatest fruit of a pastoral sabbatical is oftentimes what does *not* happen as a result. The pastor *doesn't* burn out in the months and years that follow; he *doesn't* engage in deviant behaviors, move toward an inappropriate relationship, or delve into pornography or other addictions. He *doesn't* drift toward rage, depression, or cynicism. These fruits cannot be easily measured because the destructive outcomes don't materialize to the same degree they may have otherwise, if at all. The sabbatical is as much preventative as it is prescriptive.

A common mistake church leadership teams make is to ask the pastor to report tangible results that justify the time away, with an expectation of hearing spiritual breakthroughs, specific insights into the Scriptures, a-ha moments of self-awareness or discovery, revelations about the church's direction or ministries, or profound experiences of intimacy with God. Those sometimes do occur, but the church does well not to put the pastor in a place where he is expected to return with such reports. If it does, the pastor may feel a sense of immediate failure or shame that he wasted the church's time and money. Or he may feel pressured to create a contrived impact that isn't genuine.

It is strongly recommended that the church leadership measure the sabbatical's success simply on the basis of how thoroughly and completely the pastor engaged in the prescribed foci established for his time away. The governing board can learn from his reports as to which elements worked well and not as well so that subsequent sabbatical planning can be adjusted and improved. But the best measure of success should be the degree to which the pastor fully separated, unplugged, and received opportunity to reset during the time away.

5. Should there be a difference between what is offered to lead pastors and other ministry staff members?

All full-time ministry takes a profound toll on those who carry its mantle. First-chair leaders almost always bear the heaviest load, and solo pastors are among the most vulnerable. But staff pastors live with the same kinds of pressures and demands that make pastoral ministry one of the most difficult professions in the world.

It is therefore recommended that an occasional sabbatical be extended to all full-time ministry staff of a church. The church's leadership can discern whether the frequency, length, and resourcing are identical to or different from the lead pastor. A wide spectrum of practices and policies exist in this regard. But unless there are specific factors that would indicate otherwise, a provision matching that offered the lead pastor sends a signal of value to the supporting staff.

For the sake of budgeting, ministry rhythm, and staffing demands, it is recommended that sabbaticals be spaced at least one year apart (in the case of larger staffs, it may be necessary to double-up in a year so as to maintain a repeating, 7-year cycle for all eligible staff).

Additional Resources

The “FEC Sabbatical Center” website (<https://fecministries.org/resources-all/soul-care-provisions/self-care/sabbatical-center/>) contains links to a number of helpful resources, including:

- Low and no-cost locations where pastors can spend sabbatical time away
- Recommended sabbatical reading for pastors
- The Lilly Foundation grant for sabbatical leave (churches are encouraged to search for additional sources)

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Appendix

Samples of formal church sabbatical policies

Sample 1

1. A pastor shall receive three months of sabbatical leave for every seven years of service to the church.
2. Sabbatical not to be taken prior to seven years of consecutive service at the church. Length of the sabbatical not to exceed six months.
3. Our church, at its discretion, can give credit for the pastor's years of service at a prior church, if no sabbatical time was given. Time allowed for additional education may be considered in the decision.
4. Pastors must submit a sabbatical proposal for approval to the Senior Pastor and the Elder Board, outlining in general terms how the sabbatical time would be invested. Sabbatical proposals should reflect a balance of physical rest, personal recreation, intellectual stimulation and spiritual renewal. Sufficient time for family should be included.
5. Sabbatical time is separate from the pastor's yearly vacation time. However, the pastor's vacation time during the sabbatical year will be prorated.
6. The pastor will report to the Elder Board and the congregation after the completion of the sabbatical, to indicate how the time was invested and what benefits were realized.
7. The pastor's full wages and benefits will continue for the duration of the sabbatical. No compensation should be given for unused sabbatical time.
8. Pastors will covenant with the church to serve at least two more years with the congregation after the sabbatical.
9. The church should give appropriate recognition to both the commencement and conclusion of the sabbatical period.
10. The understanding of a "sabbatical" is that the pastor is relieved from all routine and emergency duties during the time granted. The church leaders will handle routine and emergency matters.
11. Elder Board discretion will be applied for individual circumstances.

Sample 2

Purpose: This policy provides opportunity for personal renewal and refreshment so as to sustain the quality, multiply the impact, and ensure the longevity of our pastoral staff.

Eligibility: Full-time pastoral staff after 1 year of service.

Duration: Normally the period of sabbatical shall be one week after one year of service and an extended period (5 weeks) after 6 years of service and every 7 years thereafter. Variations will be considered by the elders on a case-by-case basis.

Scheduling: May be scheduled, with elder approval, any time during the year. Sabbaticals are not vacations and should not be taken with vacations. In most cases, the full amount accumulated would need to be taken at one time.

Compensation: All compensation and benefits shall continue for the duration of the sabbatical. Compensation will be negotiated if a special case sabbatical is being considered.

Project Expenses: Each applicant shall identify the non-compensation (conferences, courses, travel, accommodations, research, equipment, material, etc.) of the project; these expenses may be paid for by the church.

Applications:

- A. Recommended to be submitted to the Elder Board at least 12 months in advance of the extended sabbatical.
- B. Will include a detailed plan for the sabbatical
 - 1. Sufficient information to assure the leadership that the time away contains a balance of rest, spiritual renewal, and time for family
 - 2. Focus of study or ministry project (i.e.: improving skills, completing a project, education, research, writing)
 - 3. Possible budget impact of the project expenses above
 - 4. Coverage suggestions of staff supervision and ministry responsibilities
- C. The Elders will approve sabbaticals
- D. Associate pastors must have approval of the senior pastor prior to submitting an application to the elder board.
- E. No more than 1 person may take an extended sabbatical per calendar year, with only 1 person at a time being absent from normal responsibilities.

Recognition: Appropriate recognition to both the commencement and conclusion of the sabbatical period should be initiated by the elder board and planned by the church.

Coverage: The Elder Board will be responsible to plan the coverage of the pastor's normal and emergency duties in his absence. The pastor is relieved from all such duties during the time granted. If the pastor is personally interested in covering a special event during this time, this duty will be negotiated between that pastor and the leadership.

Review: A summary report will be submitted to the elders within 30 days following the sabbatical, summarizing the experience and its benefits.

Accrual: Unused sabbatical leave is not compensational should a pastor leave the full-time ministry of our church body.

Sample 3

Sabbatical Leave – an extended leave of absence for renewal and rest after six (6) full years of service for pastors.

Purpose:

A sabbatical leave provides an extended opportunity for the renewal of vision calling, purpose and hope. Our ministers of the gospel are expected to minister from a deep spiritual base, and a clear calling. Regular sabbaticals provide the opportunity to renew, refresh, recharge and restore the souls of those we've called to feed and lead us. Sabbaticals are a way in which we honor God and the pastors who serve us. With this in mind, _____ Church has established the following:

1. Sabbatical leave is available to all pastoral staff after each six full years of continuous service at _____.
2. Eligible pastors shall be allowed to take a sabbatical of up to 12 contiguous weeks (preferably May-August) at their current salary. Vacation time may be attached on either side of the sabbatical but the sabbatical is normally not to extend beyond 13 weeks. No part of the sabbatical may be carried over. Bona fide expenses associated with sabbatical leave (ongoing education, travel expenses, etc.) will be reviewed and approved by the Elder Board.
3. The Elder Board will appoint an ad hoc Sabbatical Team at least four months ahead of time to meet with the sabbatical candidate to establish a Sabbatical plan to include:
 - ❑ Goals for the sabbatical
 - ❑ Plan for fulfillment of pastoral duties in his / her absence
 - ❑ Financial arrangements
 - ❑ Travel arrangements
 - ❑ Human resources to assist pastor
 - ❑ Communication plan during the leave
4. Goals and timing for the sabbatical should be agreed upon by the Senior Pastor, Sabbatical candidate, Sabbatical Team and Elder Board.
5. Upon return, a report on the sabbatical shall be given to the congregation.

Sources:

"B Healthy," Pastoral Care Ministries, Evangelical Free Church of America.
"Pastoral Sabbatical Policy," Pinnacle Ministries, Inc. www.pinmin.org.