



A SABBATICAL: REST AND REJUVENATION FOR THE PASTOR AND CONGREGATION

INTRODUCTION

A sabbatical is a period of dedicated rest for the sake of renewed ministry. Fatigue that builds up over time can affect a pastor's health, family life, energy for the ministry, and creativity.

It is recommended that a pastor take a sabbatical every seven years. In the North American Lutheran Church, there is a sabbatical policy for the bishop's staff who are clergy. This sabbatical is to be offered to the Executive Staff after seven years. The length of time is three months. The length of the time away can be negotiated in the parish, but three months is typical. One month is the absolute minimum time for a sabbatical, but keep in mind that it takes about two weeks for a pastor to unwind and be able to truly rest. It is critical to look out for your pastor's well-being because she is always looking out for the well-being of everyone in the parish. With a shortage of clergy and many clergy retiring, the demands of pastors are increasing as they are expected to work longer hours, attend to more emergencies, and be a change agent in the local congregation and community.

A sabbatical is not a vacation. It is a time of dedicated study of the Scriptures and time to reevaluate one's ministry. It can also be a time for a pastor to read more on topics that are of interest/enhance the collective ministry when he returns.

It takes planning to prepare for a pastor's sabbatical. The whole congregation can get involved in the preparation for, as well as the time when the pastor is away. This will be discussed below with pointer on what to pay attention to.

PART I: THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE FOR CLERGY—ASSESSING OVERALL HEALTH

The benefits of sabbatical rest can be measured in nearly every aspect of a pastor's life, when considering the research data that demonstrates the importance of sabbath. By supporting your pastor in a sabbatical, you as a congregation are modeling the importance of rest for your pastor, a theme articulated throughout scripture. For example, in the second chapter of Genesis we hear, “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.”¹ And again from Exodus, “And the LORD said to Moses, You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, “Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you.”² When a congregation offers a sabbatical opportunity for their pastor, they are showing him that they deeply care about his health and well-being, as well as his life of faith and walk with the Lord.

A sabbatical for your pastor offers your congregation a wonderful chance to really explore gifts within the congregation, build community depth, and lean into faith formed resilience. This space could help the congregation to self-evaluate so that when the pastor returns, each are refreshed and with fresh eyes, both can engage in ministry that is Spirit filled and imagined. It also offers a renewed effort to focus on the ministry with zeal and energy.

Pastor Jody Becker has written a document entitled, “The Current Landscape for Clergy—Assessing Overall Health” in order to address the need for pastors to take care of their emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being. As you read together this four-page report, talk together about the following:

¹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Genesis 2:1–3.

² [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Exodus 31:12–14.

1. Why do you think pastors have greater levels of obesity, depression, and chronic illness than other professions?
2. What do you observe about your pastor's work week? How many hours/days does your pastor work each week?
3. Does your pastor regularly have two days off in a row? If not, why is that? What could be the long-term toll on a person who doesn't have at least two days off in a row?
4. Do you see any signs of burn out in your pastor? (Feeling alone, high stress levels over a long period of time, headaches, GI issues, chronic fatigue, increasing irritability or impatience, etc.)
5. Does your pastor seem to have enough time with his/her family?
6. Does your pastor have many true friends outside of the parish?
7. Does your pastor regularly exercise and eat healthy foods?

After you've discussed these questions, take time to pray for your pastor by name. You might begin in this way:

Holy God, you created us in your own image and commanded us to rest on the seventh day, just as you did after the creation. Grant us the wisdom to see the needs of our shepherd, Pastor _____, and the willingness to care for him/her in their weariness.

(Offer specific prayers for family, the church, the community, and renewal of all...)

We ask this through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

PART II: COMMON OBJECTIONS TO GIVING A PASTOR A SABBATICAL

When thinking about offering your pastor a sabbatical, you will often hear some common reasons why parishioners believe it's not necessary. Having these in mind beforehand can help leaders preempt such objections by having solid, well thought out answers ready. Don't make excuses to naysayers, rather proclaim the need in a very positive way.

QUESTIONS YOU MIGHT HEAR:

“What is a sabbatical?”

The above description can help you answer that question.

“Why should our pastor get a sabbatical when no one else in the congregation gets one at their place of work?”

Our pastor works six days a week and is on call every day. That kind of availability, year after year, takes a toll on a pastor, especially when he has to respond to needs after normal work hours, attend multiple meetings in the evenings each week, and prepare a sermon week after week after week. Most, if not all parish pastors, had serious challenges they faced during the global pandemic. They had to figure out how to “do church” in a crisis never before experienced. There were sick people, isolated people, and people who died all the while being rather helpless to care for the flock. There were also political issues to deal with as our culture took sides on the issues of masking, vaccines, and quarantines. Many pastors experienced a stress that was more intense than they’d ever experienced. Sleepless nights, parish conflicts, and attempts to hold everyone together posed incredible demands on pastors. Even in a time when there is no pandemic to deal with, issues of financial instability, burnout, lack of collegiality and support from other pastors, aging parents, busy children, and more cause clergy to be stretched to their limit.

“How will a sabbatical for our pastor benefit us as a congregation?”

When our pastor has time to rest, attend to her relationship with God, and even do some fun things to renew her spirit, we will all be better off for it when she comes back refreshed and reinvigorated. It is a time when the congregation can step up and take on some new tasks they never thought of doing which will strengthen their resolve and bolster their faith. In the meantime, the congregation could engage with some workshops the NALC offers as means of renewal, such as: Aging Ministries, Faith Formation, Fresh Eyes for Mission, Life-to-Life Discipleship, or even a workshop tailored to the needs of the parish.

“What will we do when our pastor is away? Will everything fall apart?”

Everything will be fine. It’s only for a window of time. The leaders of this church can handle things while the pastor is away, and we have a local pastor to help us in emergencies. We can encourage the whole congregation to care for each other in ways we haven’t done before. We will keep going and keep track of members so they don’t start missing church

and Sunday School. The pastor, though vitally important, is not the one we worship. We worship the Lord, and we can do that on our own while our pastor has this precious time.

“Is it worth the money that it will cost?”

The investment we are making in our pastor’s health will benefit the whole congregation in the long run. If our pastor burns out, he might get sick, or even leave the ministry altogether. We want our pastor to be energized and excited about ministry!

“Isn’t a sabbatical just a long vacation?”

A sabbatical isn’t a vacation at all. It is a dedicated time for our pastor to be renewed in body, mind, and spirit. It will be a time for him to read and study so that our congregation can move forward in mission with new life when he returns.

There are questions that leaders can ask the congregation to encourage them to think more holistically and see the benefit that the faith community will receive when their pastor comes back refreshed and ready to engage again.

“What can we be learning or working on while pastor is on sabbatical?”

We could invite a scholar from a nearby seminary or the North American Lutheran Seminary (NALS) to come and spend some time with us, learning about something that interests us. We could start the NALC Life-to-Life Discipleship Manual. We could begin a prayer group to cover our pastor and his family in prayer and to listen for what God is trying to say to us in this time of rest and renewal.

“How can we observe sabbath rest while our pastor is on sabbatical?”

We could spend more time together in small groups, studying the Bible and even the topic of rest, the third commandment, or spiritual disciplines. We could take turns leading the liturgy in pastor’s absence. We could be intentional about our own spiritual maturity and growth.

“How do we know our pastor will return after a sabbatical?”

It’s understandable to be concerned that this might happen, but it is customary to require the pastor to remain for at least one year after the sabbatical. A sabbatical is a time where

a pastor can continue to discern a call to the parish. A congregation that wishes to retain the spiritual leadership of their pastor for as long as they find the church's ministry aligned with the "calling" they receive from our Lord, would benefit from a time of renewal of the sense of call.

PART III: HOW TO PLAN FOR A SABBATICAL

There are numerous things to plan as you prepare to send your pastor off on sabbatical. One suggestion is to divide the time into three parts: 1/3 rest, 1/3 study, 1/3 application of what has been learned, in that order. Having a solid plan will ensure the sabbatical time accomplishes what it is meant to accomplish, namely sabbath rest, exploration, and a new beginning together as a faith community. Some recommendations for a purposeful sabbatical include but is not limited to the following:

- Deeper academic study
- Development of pastoral skills
- Preparation of parish programs
- Purposeful travel
- Research
- Renewal

The following is a short list of items to consider in your planning:

1. How will we pay for pastor's salary and benefits as well as supply preachers to cover our worship services?
2. Who will arrange for the supply pastors? Will we train congregation members to lead the liturgy? What else might change in worship during this time?
3. Who will cover for the pastor in cases of emergency visits and funerals? Who will cover communion Sundays?
4. Who will cover catechism classes or other studies pastor leads? Or will they go on hiatus for a time?
5. How can we help pastor come up with a plan for her sabbatical time so that it's beneficial to all?

6. How do we communicate the sabbatical to the congregation?
7. How will we send our pastor off on the sabbatical? How will we welcome him back after the sabbatical?
8. How will our pastor share his experiences, learnings, and insights with us when he returns?

For more information on the topic, get a copy of *Planning Sabbaticals* by Robert C. Saler.

Proposed assistance from the NALC:

A renewal grant of matching funds of either \$6,000 or \$12,000 .

The congregation will put forth funding to support the effort.