

THE MINISTRY SABBATICAL GUIDE



WHAT IS A MINISTRY SABBATICAL?

A ministry sabbatical is a period of time, usually three months, when church workers and congregations set aside the leader's normal responsibilities for the purpose of rest and renewal toward sustained excellence in ministry. It is not an extended vacation nor is it an academic sabbatical that normally involves extensive study, rather a ministry sabbatical is a release from the routine of the call for the physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual well-being of the church worker.

A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON SABBATICALS

The word sabbatical is drawn from Sabbath. The Hebrew word for *Sabbath* means to “close or rest” and is connected with the last day of creation when God rested (Genesis 2:3). God both models and commands Sabbath rest for His people. “Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8-11). Jesus affirmed the importance of rest saying, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27-28). The biblical example of Jesus' own frequent withdrawal to a quiet place to meditate, pray and be renewed is a model. In His ministry, the constant demands of people led Jesus to step away on a regular basis. See also: Genesis 1 and 2; Exodus 20:8-11, 23:10-12; Leviticus 25:1-7 (Sabbatical Year), 24:8-25 (Year of Jubilee); Psalm 23; and Ecclesiastes 3:1-8.

WHY A SABBATICAL IS IMPORTANT

Roy M. Oswald, a senior consultant with the Alban Institute, suggests that the rapid change and complexity of congregational life and ministry raises the need for three months of sabbatical rest and renewal every four to seven years. He believes that 20-30% of ministry leaders he speaks to are in a state of severe burnout. Another 20% of the same audience is on their way to severe burnout.

Richard Bullock and Richard Bruesehoff in *Clergy Renewal: The Alban Guide to Sabbatical Planning*, suggest the following motivations for considering a ministry sabbatical:

- Continual spiritual growth facilitated by periods of rest and renewal is vital toward being an effective minister.
- Pastoral responsibilities are not contained within normal office hours and regularly involve weekends.
- Rapid changes in parish ministry can increase the likelihood of burnout without periods of rest and renewal.
- Burnout makes ministry and the minister dull, hollow and uninteresting.
- It provides the opportunity for congregations to examine their dependency on the ministry leader and consider expanding the roles of lay leaders.

PLANNING A SABBATICAL

It is recommended that congregations consider the sabbatical time for their ministry leader as a time of health and hope for the congregation and its lay leaders. Thoughtful planning is important for achieving a positive experience for the ministry leader and the congregation.

SABBATICAL PLANNING FOR MINISTRY LEADERS

Sabbatical plans are very different and unique, reflecting the needs and personality of the ministry leader. Ministry sabbaticals are times for individual rest, spiritual renewal, new relationships and intellectual growth. There also may be time for family and travel. The bottom line is that it is a time “to not do what you normally do.”

WELLNESS EXPERTS AGREE THAT A MINISTRY SABBATICAL SHOULD INCLUDE AT LEAST THESE THREE ELEMENTS:

- 1** A time for personal relaxation.
- 2** A time to pursue personal interests.
- 3** A time of renewal around things that will directly benefit the congregation.

SABBATICAL PLANNING FOR CONGREGATIONS

Congregation planning should be done by the same team that is assisting in the sabbatical planning for the ministry leader. Budgeting for increased expenses will be necessary. Setting aside a small portion over several years can reduce the financial impact during the sabbatical year. The congregation sabbatical focus could be connected to the focus of the pastor’s sabbatical, but it also could focus on special congregational needs or interests.

Ministry leaders and congregations can have significant fears related to the concept of a ministry sabbatical. Discussing and addressing these fears is critical to sabbatical success. Members may fear “What will become of us if our pastor is gone for three months?” Professional workers may fear another person filling their leadership role. The congregation sabbatical planning should address these fears.

QUESTIONS THAT WILL HELP THE MINISTRY LEADER FORM A MINISTRY SABBATICAL PLAN:

- In what areas of my life do I need renewal of health and hope?
- How can I broaden and deepen my faith and vision during my sabbatical?
- What are my strengths, gifts and competencies that I could build upon during this sabbatical time?
- What are the areas of greatest stress in my work and life?
- What are the most important things I hope to experience during the remaining years of my life?
- What are the things I would like to let go of?
- What are the things I have been praying for?
- What are my core values?
- What would I like to learn or experience during this sabbatical time?
- What changes would I like to make in my life or work?
- Can I envision what it will be like to move into a three-month sabbatical?
- What will I do initially?
- What will it be like to be released from ministry duties?
- How can I include my spouse and family in the sabbatical time?
- How will my home life be different?



THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS MAY BE A HELPFUL GUIDE IN DEVELOPING A SABBATICAL PLAN AND THEN COMMUNICATING IT TO THE CONGREGATION:

- What are the issues or challenges that could bring health and hope to the congregation during this three-month period?
- What are the resources available to facilitate any process work that is done?
- Do the people in our church understand the concept of sabbatical?
- What can we do to help them with understanding? (It can take up to two years for proper preparation of the membership.)
- Are the leaders of our congregation supportive of the concept of a ministry sabbatical?
- Is there sufficient trust in our relationship to have a sabbatical?
- Is there an understanding that sabbatical time will provide the opportunity for health and growth for the congregation as well as the ministry leader?
- Is there a policy in place for sabbaticals for all the ministry leaders here? (A policy is a first step.)
- Is there a plan in place to make provisions for ongoing ministry during the ministry leader's absence?
 - Pastoral care
 - Administrative oversight
 - Supervision of staff
 - Management of programs
 - Pulpit supply
- Should we create a committee to help manage the sabbatical planning?
- Would we benefit from teams managing areas of ministry in the ministry leader's absence?
- Are there other trusted people available to fill in for the ministry leader during the sabbatical time?
- What will the sabbatical cost? (Normally the ministry leader's full salary and benefits are paid during the sabbatical time. Car allowance/mileage may or may not be included.)
- What additional costs will there be for the church?
- What additional costs will the ministry leader experience during the sabbatical?

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS MAY BE A HELPFUL GUIDE IN DEVELOPING A SABBATICAL PLAN AND THEN COMMUNICATING IT TO THE CONGREGATION (cont.):

- What personal or professional issues does the ministry leader hope to address during the sabbatical?
- What issues should the congregation be addressing during this time?
- As the time for sabbatical comes closer, would it be possible to plan a special blessing or liturgy to mark the event?
- Is there a re-entry plan in place prior to the sabbatical beginning?
- How will the ministry leader report on the sabbatical experience?
- Whom does the ministry leader need to spend intentional time reconnecting with when returning?
- What roles will need to be re-negotiated?
- What expectations will need to be addressed?
- Would the ministry leader benefit from a coach as the sabbatical plan is developed?
- Would the congregation benefit from coaching to develop a sabbatical policy and plan?
- Will the ministry leader be able to maintain a “complete absence” from the congregation even when remaining in town?
- How will emergency situations be handled within the congregation?
- Will there be any restrictions placed on the ministry leader following the sabbatical?
- What should the ministry leader be doing intentionally to prepare staff, leaders and members?
- How do we see this sabbatical helping the congregation with renewal?
- How can a sabbatical help maintain long-term relationships with professional church ministry leaders?
- What will be different for the ministry leader and the congregation during the sabbatical time?
- What will remain the same for the ministry leader and for the congregation?
- What ethical issues should be discussed prior to the sabbatical? (e.g. Is it appropriate to use sabbatical time to explore or pursue other jobs or calls? Is it appropriate for the church to review its relationship with the ministry leader who is gone?)

MINISTRY SABBATICAL POLICY DEVELOPMENT GUIDELINES

ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED AND INCLUDED IN THE PREPARATION OF A MINISTRY SABBATICAL POLICY FOR YOUR CHURCH:

- Purpose and Parameters of the Sabbatical
- Eligibility
 - Does the policy include part-time staff?
 - Does the ministry leader need to have served for a certain period of time at the congregation before the sabbatical?
 - Will there be an expectation that the ministry leader remain at the congregation for a period of time after the sabbatical?
- Length: Typically, a three-month sabbatical every four to seven years is recommended.
- Scheduling and Priorities
- Accountabilities
- Funding Options and Plan
 - Congregation may want to set aside funds each year to save for a sabbatical year.
 - Congregation may offer to match funds that a ministry leader sets aside for a future sabbatical.
 - Congregations have held fundraisers to finance the sabbatical period.
- Sabbatical Covenant



BEST PRACTICES FOR PLANNING A MINISTRY SABBATICAL

MINISTRY SABBATICALS CAN BLESS BOTH THE MINISTRY LEADER AND CONGREGATION. They are designed to be a shared experience, and the membership expects that they, both as a congregation and as individual members, will receive specific, tangible benefits from the sabbatical.

START PLANNING EARLY

Many congregations will discuss a sabbatical for years and formulate a policy. Once the commitment is made, a formal planning process needs to be initiated.

It is suggested that the ministry leader begin the planning process with the congregation **at least 12 months prior** to sabbatical leave. This timeline can be helpful for both ministry leader and congregation to “get ready” for the sabbatical.

The planning process should be led by lay members and presented to the congregation by lay members. This serves to reinforce the sabbatical as a shared experience.

DOCUMENT THE MINISTRY SABBATICAL

If you can't write it down, you don't have a plan. Clear and articulated goals that relate to the congregation are written in a way that the congregation can understand and are mission-centered.

Also, if you have a good plan, writing the grant proposal is easy. If you don't have a plan, writing the proposal forces you to create one.

HAVE HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR THE MINISTRY SABBATICAL TIME

It can be a life-changing experience for the leader but also a time for the laity to discover their strengths for ministry apart from the leader and their ability to shine in the extended absence.

And while it is tempting for the leader to try and over-plan the sabbatical, it is best to keep the goals simple.

One pastor first thought of taking a long trip during his sabbatical time. He soon realized his time was much better spent reconnecting with his wife and family and spending quiet times at home and retreat centers.

BEST PRACTICES FOR PLANNING A MINISTRY SABBATICAL

EDUCATE

Educate, educate and educate the congregation about what a sabbatical is and what the goals are for the sabbatical.

Send pre-sabbatical mailings to each family that include a letter from the committee, a weekly schedule of events and the sabbatical goals.

SABBATICAL TIME

A sufficient sabbatical time of three months or more allows time to establish new, healthy habits and behaviors for the leader and to plant them into their daily lives.

Some of the most important experiences are in the closing weeks.

COMMUNICATE WITH THE CONGREGATION

Communicate in general terms why the sabbatical is necessary to build a consensus, then fill in the details about activities. Details may include:

- Fourteen months before the sabbatical, the congregation is told informally that a planning team should be formed.
- Approximately eight months prior, there will be a formal presentation of the purpose of the sabbatical at a congregational assembly meeting, and, at about the same time, information should begin to appear in monthly newsletters.
- Four months prior, launch a funding campaign.
- About one month prior, the pastor can lead discussion groups.

A MINISTRY SABBATICAL EXPERIENCE IS NOT BEYOND REACH FOR A CONGREGATION DUE TO MEMBERSHIP SIZE, MINISTRY CONTEXT OR SOMEWHAT LIMITED RESOURCES.

Creative and shared planning with lay leaders who are committed to the concept of sabbatical and to the effort necessary to design an experience that is beneficial for both staff and congregation will make it happen.

THE TAX IMPLICATIONS OF A MINISTRY SABBATICAL

1. We are learning that in some cases there can be tax implications connected to the money received to enable a ministry sabbatical. Lutheran Church Extension Fund (LCEF) does not give tax advice and finds that implications can vary by situation and even location. We advise that in the planning process for a sabbatical, the pastor and congregation are recommended to consult with a trusted tax expert or CPA. Neither LCEF nor its representatives give legal, accounting or tax advice. Consult your tax advisor as to the applicability of this information to your own situation.
2. It is best to consult a tax professional in the early stages of sabbatical planning and will be helpful if that expert helps prepare your taxes. It is also possible to have money set aside by the congregation to help cover any tax implications. Expert advice will help both pastor and congregation navigate tax questions.
3. If a large grant is received for the sabbatical, it is important to consider any tax implications.

HELPFUL INSIGHTS

- Make sure the expectations for the ministry leader's absence are made clear from the pulpit as well as in written correspondence.
- The sabbatical is a sabbatical: the ministry leader must completely separate himself/herself from the congregation, physically, mentally and emotionally.
- Some congregations' commitment to a sabbatical is included in the ministry leader's call. The congregation should start setting aside money in a sabbatical fund at that time.
- The process of creating the proposal, presenting it to the congregation and discussing it in pre-sabbatical congregational meetings and small groups can be a valuable exercise in self-evaluation. Establishing interim leadership roles for professional staff and lay leadership did much to strengthen the congregation.
- One obstacle that may need resolution is the fatigue going into sabbatical from all the extra work of planning and preparation. Adequate time for planning is necessary, and it should be expected that fatigue would be part of the entrance into the sabbatical time.
- Trusted peers can help you see if you might be trying to pack too much into your sabbatical—thereby possibly defeating its purpose.
- The blessing of sabbatical time doesn't just come from rest. It also comes with "difference" in one's daily life. Renewal is experienced through doing different things.
- It would be good to have a ministry sabbatical policy in place before a specific individual asks to use it. Even proposing a policy can be a lightning rod experience for a congregation and ministry leaders.
- Some would agree with Roy Oswald's urgent plea for congregations to endorse a sabbatical policy for its ministry leaders. A three-month ministry sabbatical every four to seven years would produce an effective ministry in a congregation for 20 years.
- Consider utilizing outside facilitators to guide round table discussions. Our leaders are now beginning "Coming Back Together" round table discussions with ministry leaders about sabbatical lessons learned.
- Coming back from sabbatical can begin the discussion of a new focus of the role and responsibilities of the ministry leader as well as a new leadership style that meets the present needs of the congregation.
- If the ministry sabbatical is for a pastor, choose a sabbatical interim pastor carefully. One congregation identified a retired pastor who was familiar with the congregation, and it was a good experience for both.
- Consider having a "theme" for your sabbatical. One congregation chose the theme, "Breathing Life into Old Bones," and it applied to both the pastor and the congregation, which was an older historic church.
- A helpful idea as you start planning your sabbatical is to send out a newsletter early in the process to explain the sabbatical.

MEET THE COACHES



REV. DR. GREGORY S. WALTON
VP MINISTRY SOLUTIONS, GRACE PLACE WELLNESS

Greg joined LCEF's Grace Place Wellness in Fall of 2022. He now oversees all aspects of Grace Place Wellness, which is a part of Ministry Solutions in LCEF. Having served for 13 years as the District President of the Florida-Georgia District, he has a commitment to assisting church workers in the LCMS excel in their callings for their whole careers. In his role, he works to integrate wellness into other areas of LCEF to identify, coordinate and share resources that positively impact the lives of LCMS professional church workers and ministries in the LCMS.

Walton spent most of his life on the east coast, having grown up in the Mid-Hudson Valley of New York. He attended Concordia College, which was in Bronxville, N.Y., where he met his wife, Edith. He graduated with his Master of Divinity from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 1987 and served 22 years as a parish pastor in Toccoa, Ga., and Marietta, Ga., before being elected to the office of District President for the Florida-Georgia District. In his parish years, Greg was deeply involved in community ventures, served as a Circuit Visitor, and then a District Vice President.

An ardent supporter of church worker wellness and Grace Place Wellness, he sponsored a number of retreats as District President in the Florida-Georgia District, assisting and encouraging workers in their personal wellbeing. Supporting and advocating for church workers and their family has been a longtime passion for Greg.

As his term-limited time as District President came to an end in August 2022, Walton joined LCEF and Grace Place Wellness to replace retiring director, Rev. Dr. Zimmerman, who was instrumental in developing Wellness Retreats for couples, ministry staff and congregations. Greg has picked up the mantle, trying to fit into the large shoes vacated by Darrell and is exploring new areas of ministry for Grace Place Wellness as we look to the future.

Greg and Edith live in Woodstock, Ga., a suburb of Atlanta, and are in close proximity to their two children and six grandchildren. He is excited to continue to serve the church in this role.

MEET THE COACHES



REV. TIM FANGMEIER

Coaching professional church workers in creating their sabbatical experience is one of the most rewarding things for Rev. Fangmeier. His coaching training was through Valwood Certified Coaches (2002–2008). George Bullard, Jane Creswell and Linda Miller, along with other coaches, conducted this training. In addition to coaching pastors in planning sabbaticals, Fangmeier also coaches church workers who are in transition or conflict situations.

Rev. Fangmeier's journey in ministry is an interesting one. In college, he studied Advertising and Sales Management at Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio, and he received a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration. During summers in college, Rev. Fangmeier sold

Electrolux vacuum cleaners door to door, which was also an educational experience.

The influence of his campus pastor led him to consider seminary training, and he graduated from Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield, Ill., in 1971. Rev. Fangmeier's first call was to begin a mission congregation in Fort Myers, Fla. He pastored there until 1979 and assisted in two building campaigns and self-support status for the congregation.

From 1979 to 1985, Fangmeier served as senior pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church and School in Delray Beach, Fla., and from 1986 to 1993, he was the senior pastor at Ascension Lutheran Church and School in Charlotte, N.C.

In 1993, Rev. Fangmeier joined the staff of the Southeastern District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as a Mission and Ministry Facilitator to work with congregations in North and South Carolina. He helped direct mission partnerships and served as a conflict consultant to the District President.

Since 2002, Fangmeier has continued ministry as a consultant to congregations and pastors. He participates in conflict intervention, peacemaking and coaching professional church workers in times of change and conflict. As a staff associate for Wheat Ridge Ministries (now We Raise Foundation), he managed the Ministry Sabbatical Resource Center.

MINISTRY SABBATICAL RESOURCES

CLICK ON THE LINKS BELOW TO ACCESS VALUABLE RESOURCES WHEN PLANNING A SABBATICAL.

General Sabbatical Research

- [“The Need for Clergy Renewal”](#) – An article from Alban Institute, 2006
- [Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest](#) by Wayne Muller, Bantam Books, NY, 1999

Healthy Congregations

- [The Alban Institute – Congregational resource guide](#)
- [Ambassadors of Reconciliation – Workshops on peacemaking for congregations](#)

Sabbatical Funding

- [Lilly Endowment Clergy Renewal Program](#)
- [Go, Pastor. Go!](#): How clergy can take an affordable sabbatical that rejuvenates their soul, reunites their family, and reignites their congregation by using a home exchange. Everyone says pastors should take a sabbatical, but most pastors don't even dream of taking one. They just don't see how they can afford to take a sabbatical. It's time to bring together two important concepts, the clergy sabbatical and a home exchange, for a renewed pastor and a revitalized church. *Go, Pastor. Go!* tells how a home exchange makes the clergy sabbatical affordable for both the pastor and the congregation.

Sabbatical Planning and Ideas

- [Clergy Renewal: The Alban Guide to Sabbatical Planning](#) by A. Richard Bullock and Richard J. Bruesehoff.
- [Clergy Self-Care: Finding a Balance for Effective Ministry](#) by Roy M. Oswald
- [“The Dark Side of Sabbatical”](#) by Mark Miller-McLemore; Faith & Leadership
- [Christian Home Exchange](#) – This website is the portal to the Christian community at a home exchange organization with over 65,000 listings in 150 countries. A home exchange involves the concept, “You stay in my home while I stay in yours,” and is often an ideal solution for an affordable sabbatical.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON MINISTRY
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Lutheran Church Extension Fund

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