

### **Sabbaticals: *Part of a Church Health Plan***

Three years ago I began to raise the issue of sabbaticals for ministry leaders. It is encouraging to see some Bluebonnet Baptist Association churches addressing this issue. I heard recently from a church that studied the issue through their Personnel Committee and adopted by church vote their first-ever sabbatical policy. My hope is that this will become more common in Bluebonnet Association.

Why do I hope that? Because *church health strongly correlates with lengthy and healthy pastoral tenure*. One of the ways a church can help their ministry leaders stay put, stay healthy, and stay focused on their call is through implementation of a sabbatical policy. Sabbaticals are one component of an overall church health plan.

A sabbatical is different from a vacation. Hopefully your church provides ample paid vacation for your staff. But a sabbatical is something else. It is *a period in which the ministry leader is relieved from his or her normal duties with pay to renew and grow for future ministry*. A sabbatical involves rest, but the primary purpose is to provide a learning or skill-enhancing experience the ministry leader would not have otherwise. A successful sabbatical renews the ministry leader personally and professionally so that, post-sabbatical, the minister is better at ministering.

Obviously this is a good thing for the ministry leader, but it is also a good thing for the church. Ministry leaders get used up and burned out. Pastoring is an “always on call” lifestyle. Personal renewal and development often get lost in the busyness of ministry. Churches should consider a sabbatical policy for their ministry leaders *for the church’s own good*. The flock who blesses their shepherds in turn blesses themselves. The church benefits by having ministers who are refreshed and better at ministering and who are more likely to thrive over the long haul.

As you consider a sabbatical policy for your church, here are some elements to include.

1. *A statement of purpose for the policy*. Make clear why the church believes sabbaticals are important.
2. *The timeframe for sabbatical eligibility*. I recommend sabbatical eligibility for all pastoral and ministerial staff after each five years of continual service, at a minimum. Of course, based on the scope and intensity of ministry, more frequent sabbaticals may be a good idea.
3. *How long the sabbatical may be*. A range of four to six weeks is common in church sabbatical policies.
4. *A provision for continuing the ministry leader’s regular compensation during the sabbatical*.
5. *A provision for assisting with sabbatical expenses like travel, fees, books, etc.*
6. *The general goals and guidelines for a sabbatical*. I recommend that sabbaticals be built around rest and recreation, personal spiritual renewal, and learning experiences that enhance ministry skills.
7. *The process for requesting and approving a sabbatical*. Sabbaticals should be requested in writing and should honor the church’s governance and decision-making structure.

The concept of ministerial sabbaticals will be new to many church members. They may have concerns. *Who will preach for us? How will decisions get made when the ministry leader is absent? Who will provide pastoral care for the flock? How will we bear the costs of sabbatical expenses, supply preachers, or other temporary personnel?* These are legitimate questions, but they can be addressed with some planning and with the partnership of your association. Here are some suggestions.

1. As part of the written proposal that covers the scope and timeframe of the sabbatical, the ministry leader should propose a plan for how his or her area of responsibility will be covered during the sabbatical. This should include an estimate of additional costs to the church.

2. The sabbatical proposal should include a description of the planned activities during the sabbatical and an estimate of reimbursable expenses that will be incurred by the ministry leader in carrying out the sabbatical plan.

3. Once approved, the terms of the sabbatical, including how responsibilities and expenses will be covered, should be communicated clearly with the congregation and church staff.

4. If supply preachers or other temporary ministry leaders from outside the church are needed during the sabbatical, contact the association in advance for help. Bluebonnet Baptist Association staff members often can help with pulpit supply, plus we have a network of supply preachers and other ministry leaders from which to draw. We can help you arrange the temporary personnel you need during a sabbatical.

5. BBA can also partner with you to cover the additional costs of a sabbatical. Generous churches and individuals have contributed to our Minister Care Fund. These funds are available to assist member churches with sabbatical expenses, honorariums for supply preachers or other temporary personnel during sabbaticals, or other costs related to providing sabbaticals for ministry leaders. Please do not let cost keep you from having a sabbatical policy in your church!

Church members, do yourself a favor by implementing a policy for sabbaticals for your pastoral and ministerial staff. Lay leaders, become advocates on this issue. Help your ministry leaders rest and grow by providing them this special opportunity. It will bless them and contribute to the health of the church you love.

By the way, don't just take my word on the subject. Take note of what others are saying.

- *Lifeway*: <http://www.lifeway.com/pastors/2013/08/06/five-guidelines-for-a-successful-sabbatical/>
- *Focus on the Family*: [http://media.focusonthefamily.com/pastoral/pdf/PAS\\_Sabbaticals.pdf](http://media.focusonthefamily.com/pastoral/pdf/PAS_Sabbaticals.pdf)
- *Thom Rainer*: <http://thomrainer.com/2014/02/five-reasons-your-pastor-should-take-a-sabbatical/>

If you need examples of church sabbatical policies or would like to consult with someone on this issue, Dr. Minton and I are available to help. Please do not hesitate to call on us. The association is eager to partner with you in this critical aspect of church health.