

**Sabbatical Policy: Does Your Church Need It?**

By [Jack Wellman](http://christianmediamagazine.com/author/jackwellman/) ~ April 24, 2015

Does your church have a Sabbatical policy? Do they need one?  If so, what is a Sabbatical policy?

**A Sabbatical Policy**

A sabbatical is where a pastor takes off a certain period of time, not necessarily a one year period as many people might believe, but it can be a few weeks to a few months all the way up to a year.  A pastor’s role is extremely stressful and takes a high toll on them emotionally, physically, and spiritually and is no less difficult for the family and so sometimes a pastor and his family may need time to be rejuvenated or take a season of rest, even if it’s only for a few weeks.  Many recommend a pastor take a period of at least 3-5 weeks off every few years where they can get away, disconnect from the burdens of the pastoral ministry and get rejuvenated once again.  Universities and colleges have a sabbatical policy for their professors so why would it be any different for a pastor who is under constant duress and unlike a professor, they don’t have a time period of a month or more where they can get completely away from the grind of teaching and counseling.  The connection between the pastor’s longevity at a church and church growth is very close.

**Why is one Needed?**

As I touched on this already, to have a pastor’s job is extremely stressful as some pastors put in anywhere from between 55-85 hours per week.  The latest statistics indicate that 85% of pastors have never taken even one Sabbatical.[1] Almost half of all pastors aren’t even able to take one full day off.[2] Eight in ten experience negative effects on their families due to the demands of being in the pastorate while almost four in ten are either divorcing or are already divorced due to the stresses of their job.[3]  If you can’t see by now why a sabbatical may be needed and you are part of a congregation, you have either never been in the ministry or you don’t know a pastor’s weekly schedule.  I know of some congregants who actually offer to take the pastor’s children for the night so that the pastor and his wife can take off an evening for a date night and even take the weekend off for a trip to a bed and breakfast but this is so rare that I can only recall of ever hearing about this one time.

A pastor might also need a sabbatical to further their education, to complete seminary training or to complete their doctoral dissertation, but they also might desire to take a trip to the Holy Lands (e.g. Israel), to go on a missionary trip, or just take a long rest for the chance to renew and reinvigorate themselves and their family spiritually.

**What is a Sabbatical Policy?**

There are so many variations that I have found in my research and from much of this, I have just assembled an example of how to develop a sabbatical policy. This, in part, is from experience of having to sit on so many Pastoral Search Committees that I felt the reasonableness and the necessity of certain ideas that you can use to develop your own sabbatical policy. Keep in mind that a sabbatical is in the best interests of the church and the pastor and his family.  Here are some ideas that you can include in one or make adjustments where you feel its necessary:

* Select a moderator to preside over the meeting.
* Select a secretary to record the minutes (events, decisions, etc.) of the meeting.
* Develop a rough outline and provide each member of the church committee which oversees the sabbatical policy time to take it home and review, revise, or improve it.
* Educated and inform the congregation of the necessity, value, and importance of a sabbatical.
* Include in the sabbatical policy all of the pending responsibilities and requirements for filling the pulpit before the policy is even approved.
* Select and approve those who will fill the pulpit ahead of time with the selection of such person(s) in a similar fashion as one would in a pastoral search committee.
* Accrue leave of two weeks per year in the ministry.
* Accrued leave is forfeited automatically if the pastor leaves for another church or leaves the ministry altogether.
* Provide full salary and benefits during the leave.
* A pastor is to retain his pulpit during the sabbatical.
* Sabbatical’s cannot be taken any sooner than the first three to four years.
* A pastor must secure a council of elders, church leaders or church committees permission first and then have an approved policy already in place.
* A Sabbatical policy must be approved by the church leadership and the congregation is recommended to vote on or approve such a policy.
* The priority of the sabbatical is to further the church’s ministry including the role of the pastor.
* Any applications for taking a sabbatical should be submitted at least three to six months in advance to give the church adequate time to make preparations for the pastor’s absence.
* The length of the sabbatical should not be extended or reduced upon approval by the church or during the sabbatical unless extreme, or extenuating circumstances arise which could include certain emergencies but should be stipulated within the church’s sabbatical policy.
* Formulate a document, approved by the church committee to present to the general membership of the church in a format that presents the policy as outlined in the following example:

The Church of God’s Sabbatical Policy

Moderator John Smith

Approved and Adopted by the Sabbatical Committee

By Majority Vote on January, 1st, 2016.

We, the congregation of the Church of God in Wynona, Washington, wish to provide the long-term pastor and his family with the opportunity of a sabbatical leave for the purpose of professional development, personal and spiritual renewal, rest, and visioning (or give a specific reason or reasons that are applicable the pastor and his family).  By means of a sabbatical leave, the congregation wishes to express gratitude and affirmation to our pastors and their families and as an expression of support.

At the same time, it is the intent that the church will be challenged to a special time of renewal as well at the same time as an enlarged vision of its ministry so we seek your input and approval by a simple majority vote to support and/or approve this sabbatical policy with the best interests of the church and the pastoral ministry at the main purpose.

**Time to Rest**

Even our Great Shepherd took time to get away and rest because the demands of our Lord were greater than we can even imagine.  Read what Jesus told the disciples; *“The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught.  And he said to them, ‘Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.’ For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat”* (Mark 6:30-31). Sometimes Jesus just knew it was time to withdraw Himself and go into a desolate place (Matt 14:13; John 6:15).  Since pastors are every bit as human as anyone else in the church and if even Jesus needed rest at times, how much more do pastors need time away with their families to rest?  The idea of having a sabbatical policy may not be for every church because not every church is large enough to be able to do this or some may not even seen the reasoning behind it but for many churches, developing a sabbatical policy well ahead of time makes good sense and will only serve to strengthen the church in the long term and may also preserve and lengthen the pastor and his families stay at the church.

*[Editor’s note: In my experience I have seen it helpful for a pastoral candidate to discuss sabbatical during the candidacy. An example would be to suggest that after 3 years of service the pastor and his family will take a sabbatical — when it is agreed upon before the pastor accepts the call to a church it comes as no surprise to the congregation when it is time for the previously agreed upon sabbatical. It is a good idea for a pastoral candidate to have a sample sabbatical policy available for the search committee, just in case the idea of the sabbatical had not previously been entertained.]*

**Conclusion**

Perhaps you have your own ideas about a sabbatical policy, even if you don’t agree with the need for one.  Please suggest what you would add or change or tell us why you feel that a sabbatical and an associated sabbatical policy might not even be necessary in the church where you are at.

**Related reading:** [5 Signs You are st Pastoral Burnout …](http://christianmediamagazine.com/worship-leadership/5-signs-pastoral-burnout-need-vacation-break/)

Resources – [1] Focus on the Family 2009 survey of 2,000 pastors. [2] Pastors at Greater Risk by H.B. London and Neil B. Wiseman, Regal Books, 2003. [3] David Ross and Rick Blackmon’s “Soul Care for Servants” workshop reported the results of their Fuller Institute of Church Growth research study in 1991 and other surveys in 2005 and 2006.