

General Information about Sabbaticals

What is a Sabbatical?

The word “sabbatical” is rooted in the Hebrew word “Shabbat” which means “rest.” In Israel, the day of rest is the day of the week we call Saturday. They call that day “Shabbat.” The third commandment tells us to “remember the Sabbath day (Shabbat) and keep it holy.” In the ancient tradition, people and animals would work from dawn to dusk and rest on every seventh day; fields would be allowed to rest every seventh year. It was a way to keep the body, mind and soul healthy.

In our busy American culture we usually work beyond the dawn-to-dusk work day and often neglect to really rest on the seventh day. Reclaiming the Sabbath and sabbaticals helps us get our needed rest so we can work in a healthier way and with a higher quality of performance. A sabbatical is a time to be released from normal duties so that the pastor may devote time to rest and renewal, then focused study and planning. Sabbaticals have long been a practice in the field of education and in recent years many businesses and congregations have also been implementing them.

Why do we want our pastor to do this?

- ✓ Being an effective pastor involves continual spiritual growth.
- ✓ Parish ministry today is changing rapidly. Pastors need to retreat periodically to retool or refocus their ministry approaches.
- ✓ Pastors work long, hard hours without weekends off and are rarely afforded the luxury of having two consecutive days off every week.
- ✓ Because of the stress of doing ministry in this changing culture and because of the long hours of work each week, without regular renewal leave (a sabbatical) pastors risk facing symptoms of emotional burnout and poor physical health.

How does the congregation benefit from the pastor's sabbatical?

- ✓ Our pastor will almost assuredly come back with refreshed energy and a clearer focus for ministry in our midst.
- ✓ Our congregation's ministry will get even stronger and our pastor will be healthier and doing better ministry
- ✓ With the pastor gone for a while, we get to keep from becoming overly dependent on her or him.

What should be considered when offering a Sabbatical?

The ELCA strongly promotes sabbaticals for its rostered ministers. In the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin, we have a sabbatical policy for congregations which recommends offering a sabbatical every three to five years for one to three months. The standard used by most congregations in our synod is to offer three months every five years.

Other particulars include:

- ✓ Some congregations set dollars aside in the budget each year to help defray the costs of a sabbatical.
- ✓ Pastors may present a written plan for their sabbatical to the congregation council. Usually this is done three to six months in advance of the sabbatical. This written plan can include such details as their personal objective, a description of the major elements of the experience, proposed beginning and ending dates, listing of job responsibilities so proper coverage may be arranged, and any anticipated cost to the congregation.
- ✓ Pastors receive full salary, pension and health benefits; car allowance is not usually paid during the sabbatical time. Pastors are responsible for the educational cost of the sabbatical, though their continuing education dollars may be used.

This is a wonderful time for congregational lay leaders to step forward and take responsibility for the ministry and programs of the congregation while the pastor is gone. People with gifts for being worship assistants or preachers or for doing hospital and home visits or doing administration get an opportunity to really build those gifts. **The sabbatical is an opportunity not only for the pastor, but for the whole congregation!**