

Guidelines for Implementing a Ministerial Staff Sabbatical *(Revised 12/22/21)*

Background:

The word “sabbatical” comes from the Hebrew word “Shabbat” (Sabbath), meaning “cease” and “rest”, but in the Biblical understanding it means more than just a day off. It is a day consecrated to God, when God’s people cease to do ordinary labor, but instead rest, worship, and enjoy God’s creation. In the last several years, many churches have become convinced of the importance and benefit of granting periodic sabbatical leave to ministers. By being released for a period of time from their normal, ongoing responsibilities, ministers have time to reflect and rest for the purpose of renewal and revitalization toward sustained excellence in ministry.

Primary Purpose of a Sabbatical:

Pastors have a unique calling that often comes with unusual hours and non-traditional work weeks. In addition to working weekends, they are often pulled away from their families on many evenings. In essence, it is a “24/7” role, and is often misunderstood.

As such, a sabbatical leave is periodically granted to ministerial staff with these primary purposes:

- To give time off to ministerial staff for personal and professional enrichment in accordance with the Biblical principal of rest and refreshment embodied in the Sabbath.
- To encourage longevity, spiritual and intellectual growth, and excellence in the work of ministry.

The Committee on Ministerial Care (CMC) strongly encourages churches to consider adopting a Sabbatical Policy customized to each specific situation. The following guidelines have been adopted after reviewing the best practices of several Reformed denominations. Feel free to reach out to the CMC for guidance and direction on this topic. You can also take advantage of the other useful reference materials that are available on the CMC website at www.opccmc.org.

Key Considerations:

1. Ownership: Both the local session and minister need to take ownership when planning a sabbatical leave. The best way to accomplish this is to develop a comprehensive, written plan which addresses all critical ministry needs, expectations, and potential areas of concern. An example of a Sabbatical Policy is attached as Appendix A.

2. Eligibility: The eligibility for a paid sabbatical is typically granted for every 5-7 years of ministerial service. Each individual situation will dictate whether that time frame should be shorter or longer.



3. Length: The length of a sabbatical varies, depending on the minister's length of service and the circumstances in the local church. Typically, a sabbatical should be no shorter than three months, and is often in the three to six month range.

4. Compensation: The usual practice is that a minister's employment and call package provisions remain in effect during a sabbatical leave.

5. Pulpit Supply & Other Duties: It is important to have a comprehensive written plan to address the ongoing weekly responsibilities that will need to be replaced. The most obvious is pulpit supply for Sunday worship. The church may need a full-time interim minister, which could incur substantial cost. The session should work with the minister, along with their presbytery (well in advance of the sabbatical leave), to find capable men to fill a church's needs. The Committee on Ministerial Care has compiled a list of ministers who have indicated a willingness to serve as pulpit supply. Please contact the committee for access to the list.

6. Sabbatical Funding: Part of the planning process for sabbaticals that can be most discouraging and may even prevent a sabbatical plan from moving forward is finding needed finances, especially in those cases when a full-time interim minister is needed. As with many financial matters before the church, planning, budgeting, strategizing, researching, and creative thinking are the keys in meeting the financial cost of a sabbatical. It is important that this be one of the first items to consider early in the sabbatical planning process, even years ahead of time. The Committee on Ministerial Care has set aside funds for churches to apply for a grant to help pay for the sabbatical. Please see our website or contact the committee for the sabbatical grant application.

7. Reporting & Accountability: Best practices in this area suggest that the minister and session develop a written set of expectations concerning the desired outcomes of the proposed sabbatical. All parties should sit down together and have a "mutual expectations exchange" prior to the sabbatical. The minister and the session should periodically communicate during the sabbatical. Best practices indicate that a minister should have only one point of contact with the church to free him from his normal load of communications (phone, text, email, etc.).

8. Other Matters to Consider:

a. Be flexible. It is important to recognize that when it comes to the duration and nature of a ministerial sabbatical, there is no one-size-fits-all. It is expected and normal that one minister will find a particular sabbatical plan restful and productive while another minister yearns for something altogether different. The goal is to provide the rest needed in each situation. Also keep in mind that any length of sabbatical is better than none at all.

b. Recognize the various forms a sabbatical can take. A perusing of best practices indicates there are basically three types of rest that can individually define, or in combination be incorporated into, a sabbatical:

1) Vacation and Family Refreshment. A minister may need time to physically rest and/or spend extra time with family.



2) Study leave. Some sabbaticals take the form of a minister devoting himself to concentrated, undistracted times of study. Perhaps he has a big writing project that he just has not had time to get to. He may desire the benefits of taking further education classes or finishing a degree. He may find it helpful to have concentrated time preparing sermons and Bible study lessons.

3) Spiritual refreshment. Many sabbaticals involve the minister having extra time for prayer and meditation on God's Word. Retreats and conferences can be particularly useful venues for spiritual renewal.

c. Sabbaticals benefit the church. Sabbaticals have provided many ministers the opportunity to complete work projects that have benefitted the church for generations. At the very least, sabbaticals are a tool that helps ministers come back to the work of ministry with a zeal that carries over into their doing higher quality work over an extended period of time. In the end, it is the church that benefits the most from a minister who does his work joyfully and fruitfully.

Appendix A - Example of a Sabbatical Policy

What follows is an example of a policy for a ministerial sabbatical. The underlined components will vary from church-to-church depending on their unique situation.

The session and congregation of _____ Church recognize the calling and commitment of ministers to the tasks of shepherding the church of Jesus Christ. We therefore establish the following sabbatical policy to honor, esteem, and bring encouragement to our minister that he might be refreshed and strengthened for further ministry to the congregation and community:

1. A sabbatical plan must be approved by the session before implementation. Any sabbatical plan approved by the session will be communicated and presented to the congregation.
2. A minimum of five years is to be served before a request can be submitted for approval.
3. Time allotted for a sabbatical shall typically be three months after five years, five months after ten years, and six months after fifteen years of service. This time must be taken all at once. Vacation time may be added to the accrued time to extend the length of the leave.
4. Full salary and benefits shall be paid during the leave.
5. A full plan, including provisions for interim staffing, financial considerations, and goals, shall be developed through the cooperation of the minister and session.
6. Upon returning from his sabbatical, the minister shall give a report to the church session and congregation.
7. The minister on sabbatical shall agree to serve the church upon return for at least one full year.

**= the underlined portions are flexible to accommodate the needs of the pastor and the individual church.*