

The Parish and the Minister's Sabbatical

*Why clergy should have a sabbatical . . .
How to put it together*

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Introduction

We are becoming increasingly aware that clergy are subject to the same pressures found in other professions and also that they suffer from stresses that are unique to the ministry. Clergy experience emotional collapse, stress related illness, and "burn-out" that have too long been viewed as inevitable parts of the job. Consequently churches suffer from the ministrations of clergy who are exhibiting the symptoms of such stress. The solution has often been for clergy and churches to make frequent pastoral turnovers in a kind of ecclesiastical musical chairs. I am convinced that there is a perfectly good solution for the hazards of the profession in the ancient traditions of the church. It is called The Sabbatical.

I was the pastor of one church for eighteen years. During that time I went on two sabbaticals. My predecessor never had a sabbatical in all the fifty years of his ministry there. But my predecessor never had a meeting in the evening in all those fifty years! He could spend evenings in his study voraciously reading every book on which he could lay his hands. His evenings were his sabbatical. I am sure that it was my sabbaticals that made my eighteen-year ministry more productive and satisfying. More important, I am sure that the sabbaticals have been beneficial not only to me but also to the church. This article describes the function of a sabbatical for those clergy and churches who might consider providing sabbatical leave as part of their church's program.

I. What is a sabbatical?

The sabbatical tradition began in the university at the time when the university was part of the church. The idea then was that the Doctors of the church, who were the university professors, needed one year in every seven to become students again and to refresh their spiritual calling. That tradition is alive and well in secular as well as church-related universities. Unfortunately, it is not nearly as alive or well in the churches.

The idea that the teacher needs to become a student again and that the professional clergy need to

become simply worshippers is still sound, but it is not given the weight that it deserves. A sabbatical is simply a time given every seven years during which the Pastor/Teacher/Minister is required to become a student and worshipper for the purpose of refining and updating professional skills and refreshing his/her spiritual life and calling.

II. Why Should Parish Ministers Take Sabbaticals?

Because both the ministers and the churches they serve need them! That statement establishes a basic and important point, namely, that the sabbatical is for the benefit of *both the pastor and the church*. The idea that the sabbatical is a reward for good work, or simply a "perk" to keep the pastor happy, rests on an erroneous understanding of the nature and process of sabbatical. The sabbatical is not simply an extension of the normal vacation period, another common misunderstanding by both pastors and members of churches. Rather, the sabbatical is an important part of the program of the church and the working relationship between the church and the clergyperson, from which both can expect to draw benefit.

The variety of skills that the modern parish minister is required to master or possess in some measure easily become outdated. Pastors may deal with "eternal truths" but eternal truth is the most consistently and constantly reinterpreted segment of the human intellectual enterprise! Teaching, counseling, preaching, organization, administration, supervising, and writing are all skills that may very quickly become outdated and stale. It is impossible for a pastor to upgrade his/her skills during the normal routine of parish ministry. Impossible, not because the pastor is any busier than anybody else, but because the parish ministry is a most irregular profession. The scheduling routine and consistency required for an ongoing effort to upgrade skills are not possible in the ever-shifting schedule common in parish ministry. There must, therefore, be a hiatus in that variable schedule if the pastor is to do the necessary work.

The second reason a pastor should be required to be on sabbatical every seventh year is more subtle.

The parish ministry is a difficult job. The pastor is required to be involved almost constantly with people in difficult and stressful situations. Much of that stress ends up in the pastor! None of this is crushing in itself, but cumulatively over a period of years it becomes overwhelming. In fact, it has been my experience that about six to seven years is the limit of most pastors' tolerance before they begin to show the effects of this role as head of the parish household.

The wisdom of the seventh year sabbatical is reinforced by the statistics, which in my denomination indicate that pastoral changes cluster around the five- to seven-year marks. There are, no doubt, reasons that could be put forward for this clustering, but I am convinced that in large measure it is due simply to the fatigue that sets in at about six years of parish ministry. Unconsciously the pastors know that they need a change and a renewal and so most pastors decide that the way to get those needs met is to change churches! Additionally, the fatigue factor may begin about this time to adversely affect the pastor's performance and attitudes and so the church may agree that it is time for him/her to change churches or at least leave theirs!

The church needs a sabbatical, too. After about six years the church has gotten used to the pastor and their relationship has become somewhat stale. The "honeymoon" of the new pastor's arrival has been over for four or five years. The changes in style and program that the new pastor brought have become routine and the congregation is ready for a change. So when the pastor decides to leave, they protest, but not strongly. It is, in my opinion, unfortunate when this occurs—both for the pastor and for the parish. The pastor is limited to pastoral experience of about five to seven years and the parish misses the security and benefit of a pastor with a long history of experience. Both pastor and parish simply repeat the same five- to seven-year experience. The result is that our denomination has many pastors who have been ordained for fifteen years but who have only seven years of experience as parish ministers! My experience tells me that the clergy in my denomination are not unique. Many of our churches that have been in existence for hundreds of years have not experienced a pastorate longer than seven to ten years in the last one hundred years. In its more than two hundred years' history, the church I served has had only three pastors who stayed longer than I did. I am not a better pastor than all those others; I attribute my longevity to the sabbaticals. The simple addition of a sabbatical every seven years could give both pastor and parish a much longer and richer experience. Both pastors and parishes need sabbaticals.

III. How to Take a Sabbatical

Once the church and the pastor have made a mutual decision to provide for a sabbatical, the following outline of steps will get them underway:

1. Determine the time parameters. The pastor and the board should sit down with a calendar and decide the length of the sabbatical and the best time for the sabbatical.

Very few churches can afford to give the pastor a sabbatical year as is the practice in universities. The more common length of time is three or four months. My own sabbaticals have been three months plus the regular month of vacation. It is important that *the sabbatical period should not include normal vacation time*. It is vital to maintain the distinction between sabbatical and vacation. The two are not interchangeable. When the pastor is on sabbatical he/she is not on vacation, and conversely when the pastor is on vacation that is not sabbatical time. Maintaining this clear distinction will help to clarify the nature of the sabbatical, since most people know what a vacation is!

Determining the best time for the sabbatical must take into consideration both the church's schedule and the pastor's needs. Sometimes it must first be determined what the pastor is going to do with the sabbatical before it can be decided when it will be taken. Other situations may dictate that the time period is set and then the pastor decides what is available during that time. The most common sabbatical time period is during the summer months. It must also be decided whether or not the vacation and the sabbatical will be taken consecutively. *It should be spelled out clearly which months are sabbatical and which are vacation*. Often a sabbatical plan includes a statement in which both the pastor and the parish agree to maintain their relationship for at least one full calendar year after the sabbatical. Such a statement helps to relieve both the pastor and the parish of any anxiety that the sabbatical time will be used to make a pastoral change. *These decisions should be taken with the major board and should be approved by vote*.

2. Determine the financial arrangements. It is accepted practice to pay the pastor full salary and benefits during the sabbatical. Any other arrangements would be a departure from the norm and would raise the question as to whether what is being suggested is in fact a sabbatical. Whether or not the church pays for any of the other expenses connected with the sabbatical is completely negotiable. Tuitions, travel, books, etc., may be paid for by the church or by the pastor. If the pastor pays for them, they may be deductible from income tax and continuing education costs. If the church pays, they may be taxable as income to the pastor.

There will also be additional expense to the



Three steps to sabbatical planning:

Step #1—Determine Time Parameters

- When?
- How long?
- Clarify and distinguish vacation and sabbatical

Step #2—Determine Financial Arrangements

- Continuation of full salary and benefits during sabbatical
- Who will pay?
- How will they pay?
- What about additional costs?
- Housing and travel financing?

Step #3—Make Specific Sabbatical Plans

- Goals, objectives, and strategies
- Can the work be achieved in the time available?
- Plan for pastoral care and public worship during sabbatical
“Reentry plan”
- Plan for report to the parish (with deadline)
- Clarify sabbatical benefits to pastor and parish

By-Word for planning a sabbatical: Submit a Plan—Take a Vote

church during the pastor's absence. There will be some necessity to cover the pastor's duties while he/she is gone. This may entail expenses beyond the normal budget. At this point it becomes clear, I hope, that sabbatical planning must be done well in advance. In fact, it is my opinion that throughout the six years between sabbaticals, the church ought to be setting aside funds for the sabbatical, to pay for either a replacement for the pastor during the sabbatical or the pastor's sabbatical expense, or both. It has been my experience that the financial burden to the church is not large and is almost unnoticeable if it is built into the regular budget during the six years preceding the sabbatical year.

The best sabbaticals are those in which the pastor is “out of town.” It is hard to be truly on sabbatical while one is still in the same locale. Some pastors I have known have been able to stay away from the parish during an “at home” sabbatical, but in most cases even then their sabbatical experience has not equalled that of those who went away. However, being away usually means significant housing costs. For those who live in parsonages or who are unable or unwilling to rent their homes during the sabbatical, the factor of housing costs should be taken seriously if it is considered desirable that the pastor be out of town during the sabbatical. Most scholastics find a way to move themselves and their families away from “home” and reside elsewhere at about the same cost-of-living. Even granting that academic sabbaticals are almost always longer than church sabbaticals, clergy ought to be able to make similar



arrangements.

3. Make specific sabbatical plans. The sabbatical should be carefully planned. There should be a goal, objective, and strategy. The pastor must determine what it is that he/she hopes to accomplish during the sabbatical and how it is to be accomplished. These goals, objectives, and strategies should be submitted to the major board for review and approval. There should be some estimate of their achievability during the sabbatical period, and if it is determined that the goal cannot be achieved in that amount of time, provision for finishing the work should be made. It should be clear not only how the sabbatical will benefit the pastor, but what benefit can be expected by the parish. It is perfectly correct and even necessary for the parish to ask: “What's in it for us?”

If, after such deliberations, a writing project is what is finally selected, some estimate of whether or not it can be finished must be made as well as some provision for time to finish if it is determined that it is unlikely that the pastor can finish writing during the sabbatical. My observation is that most pastors vastly underestimate the amount of time necessary for research before one can begin writing and at the same time vastly overestimate their own discipline for writing. Few things are more discouraging than a half written project moldering on a shelf!

The key to all of the above is advance planning. Since one has six years to get ready it ought to be possible to find creative ways of planning and financing a sabbatical that includes travel, constructive plans, and modest additional cost. However, almost all of the above depends on the initiative of the individual pastor. Academics have developed a large fund of experience and information to help one another take sabbaticals. Clergy are pretty much on their own.

The role of the parish is a bit like that of the Senate of the U.S. in the process of a major Presidential Appointment: Advise and Consent. When the plan is submitted, the parish can advise the pastor. When the plan is agreed to, the vote represents their consent. Each step may require separate votes at different times. A few may require more.

IV. Re-entry After the Sabbatical

Coming back from a sabbatical is a lot more difficult than leaving! While the pastor has been gone the parish has not stood still—hopefully! In some sense the pastor comes back to a new parish. That is both a benefit and a peril of sabbaticals. A pastor cannot get back in touch with a new parish all at once. In much the same way the parish has to get reacquainted with the pastor. Both pastor and parish need a little time.

Pace is important. In most cases the pastor has been operating at a different pace during his/her sab-

batical. He/she cannot suddenly jump back into the regular, or irregular pace, of parish activity. A wise professor of mine once said: "It is not possible to board a moving train with a perpendicular leap!" The pastor must run alongside the train for a bit to catch up with parish momentum.

Advance planning is just as important for reentry as it was for lift-off. It is extremely unwise to leave things for the pastor to start when he/she gets back. Various group activities should be planned in advance so that they will have already been started when the pastor returns. Stewardship, adult education and parish "specials" should all be planned before the pastor leaves so that when he/she returns they are already going or can start up without much pastoral assistance. Things that require the pastor's assistance and guidance should not be planned until at least a few weeks after the return. The return from sabbatical should be celebrated with a reception, a dinner, or other occasion for members of the parish to gather and meet their pastor. Visiting, particularly the older and shut-in members of the parish, is a good way to ease back into the parish routine. Also the older and shut-in members are probably the ones who have missed the pastor most.

The best way I know of to bring the pastor up to date on the pastoral situation is with a journal or parish diary. Deacons or other designated persons should keep a diary or journal during the pastor's absence. Illnesses, hospitalizations, baptisms, weddings, funerals, and such should be recorded chronologically. The journal or diary should provide the pastor with a week-to-week narration of the parish while he/she was gone. It does not have to be a detailed novel, but it should cover the details. By reading through the journal/diary the pastor can be updated and reintegrated into the parish.

A special concern is that situation where there is more than one pastor. The pastor who is going on sabbatical and the other pastor(s) should set aside some time before the sabbatical begins at which they review plans and schedule and set a time to get-together again when the sabbatical ends to run through what has been going on. The "debriefing" time should be part of the sabbatical plan that is submitted to the major board. When he/she returns from sabbatical the pastor should also meet with other members of the staff and key lay leaders to be brought up to date. One word of caution: It is a perfectly understandable human need to feel that one's absence was noticed! There is a temptation for the pastor who has been on sabbatical to look for evidence that things did not go as smoothly as they might have if he/she had been there! It is a temptation that ought to be resisted in the understanding that the pastor who was in charge during the other pastor's sabbatical has at least an equal need to feel that he/she did a good job and everything went just

as smoothly as it might have if the sabbatical pastor had been there. This is a particularly important sensitivity since in most cases it will be the senior member of the staff who has been on sabbatical while the associate (and usually junior) member of the staff was left in charge. Of course, if something did go seriously wrong, it must be acknowledged and addressed, but the pastor who has been on sabbatical must avoid making the other pastor feel inept simply to feed his/her need to feel needed!

Finally, the pastor should report to the parish. The sabbatical report should be part of the agreement between the pastor and the major board. The sabbatical report probably ought to be made in more than one way. I am of the opinion that there should always be a written report that covers in detail what the pastor did and accomplished during the sabbatical. The written report should be submitted to the board as soon as possible upon the pastor's return. (That deadline ought to be a part of the original agreement.) The board should formally accept the report and then disseminate it broadly to the entire parish. Even those persons who are not close to the parish deserve to receive a report of the sabbatical. In addition there ought to be an oral report of some sort. Perhaps the pastor can provide an anecdotal report on the sabbatical at a regular meeting of a church group or groups. In all of this reporting equal weight ought to be given as to how the sabbatical has benefited the pastor and how the parish can expect to benefit from the sabbatical.

V. Conclusion

The sabbatical is an important event in the life of the pastor and the parish. It is one of the most effective ways for a pastor and parish to develop and maintain a long-term relationship. I am sure that there are arguments in favor of short-term pastoral relationships, but I believe that the value of longer relationships far outweighs any possible benefits of short ones. A well-thought out and well-planned sabbatical that is viewed as a regular part of the pastor/parish program can be an important ingredient in a long and mutually beneficial pastoral relationship.

Finally, detailed provisions for sabbatical should be written in Ministerial Call. Those denominational officials who labor in the field of placement ought to take the provision for sabbaticals as part of the church Call seriously. The sabbatical is an important and even crucial ingredient in the long-term program planning of the church. The parish must "own" the sabbatical. It is not healthy when the sabbatical is thought of as simply something the parish "gives" the pastor to do with as he/she pleases. The sabbatical is a church program and should, therefore, be planned and funded like any other program and should be designed to benefit the parish and to enrich the pastor's ministry in that parish. ✦



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