



# **SABBATICAL GUIDELINES**

A resource for congregations choosing to develop a sabbatical policy.  
Michigan District, LCMS

**“Those that wait upon the Lord  
shall renew their strength:  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
they shall run and not be weary,  
they shall walk and not faint.” (Is. 40:31)**

## **BACKGROUND**

The Michigan District, LCMS provides this document as guidance to congregations and schools of the Michigan District, LCMS **that choose to develop** their own sabbatical policies or guidelines. These guidelines were presented to the Commission on Ministerial Growth and Support of the Michigan District, LCMS for their review in November 2008. With their affirmation, these are being presented to the congregations and schools of the district for their consideration in their own ministry settings. This document affirms the concept of sabbatical and expands it to include other professional church workers.

## **PROLOGUE**

The word “sabbatical” is derived from “Sabbath.” Historically in church and academia, the professionals were given a Sabbath (sabbatical) every seventh year. The observation was that academic professors and clergy were so worn out after six years of teaching and leading that they needed a year of rest, recovery, renewal, and reeducation for their field of endeavor. The assumptions were that it benefited the professional person (avoiding breakdown, burnout, depression, or distress) and that it benefited the institution (re-energized, renewed, and strengthened service and leadership). It is based on Genesis 2:1-4a in which God modeled and later required (Exodus 1:8-11) the setting aside of 1/7<sup>th</sup> of our time for restoration.

Ministers of religion (pastors, principals, DCEs, DCOs, school administrators, educators, etc.) need to recreate and restore what has been worn down by day-to-day encounters with reality. Nourishing one’s body, mind, and spirit and regaining perspective requires a change of pace and place - a pilgrimage. Jesus provides us a good example to follow. He actively nourished his whole person, body, mind, and spirit - in prayer, in teaching, in travel, in time alone, in rest, and in the caring for people. By His so living, the apostles who walked and worked with Him learned from Him and benefited as well. That is what sabbatical is about – an extended pilgrimage away from the “normal” activities of life as we know it in the exercising of the roles, functions, and responsibilities of our vocations and

into others which restore, renew, rebuild, and rejuvenate the whole person, body, mind, and spirit. It is a significant change of life and living for an extended period of time that ultimately benefits the person, his/her family, and the ministry of call.

Sabbatical typically includes time for prayer, meditation, reading, writing, resting, reflection, fasting, or other diet management, traveling, visiting new places and engaging in new experiences, and experiencing different cultures. The best sabbaticals usually are more open-ended than rigid, allowing for the surprises, and possible new direction, that may come. Jesus' forty days in the wilderness marked a turning point in His ministry. David tended sheep and learned valuable lessons about God's care and provision. Paul, struck down on the road to Damascus, disappeared into the desert of Arabia for three years, and emerged with a new vision. Sabbatical is a time to rest, receive, be nurtured, and reflect on your relationship with God and your own story, so that the worker can be renewed, refreshed, and revitalized by the breath of God.

## I. VALUES AND ASSUMPTIONS

- A. Giving support to professional workers in maintaining good health benefits the worker, the congregation/school, and the church at large.
- B. Healthy professional workers build healthy congregations and schools.
- C. When there is a good match between the professional worker and a congregation/school, a long term ministry is desirable. In such instances, a sabbatical is cost effective.
- D. Good self-care, which includes a regularly scheduled sabbatical, keeps a professional worker healthy. It can enable him/her to achieve a new sense of vision, renew his/her calling, evaluate his/her gifts and skills and the needs of the ministry.
- E. A professional worker who practices good self-care remains healthier and may extend his or her life and ministry.
- F. The sabbatical time can open up new opportunities for members to grow in service and be a blessing for the congregation/school and church at large.
- G. Sabbatical leave should be an ongoing *intentional* part of a congregation's / school's ministry, not a reaction to a crisis (i.e. burnout, forced removal, etc.).
- H. Sabbaticals are a way that congregations/schools can minister to their professional workers.
- I. Every congregation and school has its own unique challenges and resources and therefore needs to develop its own sabbatical "policy" or guidelines.

## II. RECOMMENDATIONS AND GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPING A SABBATICAL POLICY

### A. Determine the Time Parameters

#### 1. When?

- Timing is crucial so as to minimize disruption to the congregation/school. Plan long in advance to prepare the congregation/school for a smooth transition.
- The professional worker and congregation/school will need about a year to plan the sabbatical.

#### 2. How long?

- The Michigan District recommends 3 successive months + vacation time (not in place of) every 7-10 years.
- Clarify and distinguish *vacation* and *sabbatical* (A sabbatical is not simply a reward or vacation, but an important part of the working relationship between professional church worker and congregation/school.)
- Ask: Can the sabbatical purpose and goals be achieved in the time available?

### B. Determine Financial Arrangements

1. A continuation of full salary and benefits during sabbatical (except car allowance) is advisable.
2. How will this be financed? Some options might include:
  - Entirely financed by the congregation/school where this is possible. This could be provided for in the annual budget, by setting aside some dollars each year into a sabbatical fund, or through special gifts.
  - Alternate financing may be available, depending on the nature of the sabbatical (e.g. Wheat Ridge, Thrivent, Lilly Foundation, etc.)
3. What about additional costs? (e.g. supply preaching, pastoral assistance) The congregation should budget or set aside sufficient funds to cover the cost of a replacement church worker during the worker's sabbatical.
4. Would the congregation/school assist with tuition costs, where it is applicable and feasible?

## C. Make Specific Sabbatical Plans

### 1. Design

- Sabbaticals are very individual. There is no right or wrong plan, though a plan should demonstrate some benefit to be derived by both the worker and the congregation/school. There needs to be mutual agreement by the professional church worker and congregation/school on the sabbatical plan. It is useful to have a “mentor” (one who has done it) help develop the plan. Will the sabbatical be programmed or open-ended? for what purpose? spiritual growth? theological reflection? creative expression? pastoral concerns? research in a given area? writing a book or a manuscript? prayer, reflection, and meditation? physical health restoration? combinations of these? other?
- Options might include:
  - a) encounters with other cultures and with Christian communities in other countries, especially less developed ones (e.g. mission trip)
  - b) research or writing on independent projects or as part of a formal seminar or academic program
  - c) directed reflection on personal and spiritual issues
  - d) recreation and rest
  - e) working on a ranch or other outdoor setting
  - f) involvement with specific community, social, or cultural needs or ventures
  - g) engaging in activities that reconnect and rebuild family relationships

### 2. Purpose

- Is it for rest, spiritual renewal, new experiences and relationships, intellectual growth, decision making time, travel, family time, etc.?
- What does the professional worker want (dream, hope) to happen to himself/herself personally? How would he/she like the congregation/ school and his/her family to benefit?
- A sabbatical is a time to NOT DO what you normally do. (e.g. do not preach, teach, do normal preparation for ministry, “set foot on the church property”, etc.) The worker should not see this as another time to be as busy as he/she was before, just in another setting and on a different subject.

### 3. Physical setting

- This could be a retreat center, foreign travel, home, university, etc. The potential settings are almost limitless and one sabbatical may involve a number of them. Be creative. (See Focus on the Family Pastoral Retreat Guide for possible retreat locations)

- Boundaries are important and need to be established in writing and agreed upon - For example: a complete absence from the congregation/school, even when the worker is in town.

#### 4. Other Considerations

- The congregation/school may want to appoint a *Sabbatical Committee* (3-5 members, which would include the President, an Elder, and a School Board representative if person on sabbatical is in the school) to assist both the professional worker and congregation/school in planning the sabbatical.
- Recognize that it may take at least two years of education to help the congregation/school leadership understand the value of the sabbatical the first time they offer it. Don't rush this. Gain the congregation's/school's ownership and support.
- Clarify sabbatical benefits to professional worker and congregation/school. A good sabbatical meets a mutual need. What does the worker want to happen to himself/herself personally? How would he/she like the congregation/school to benefit? What can be special for his/her spouse, children, and friends? What is in it for them? What will they gain? What will it cost?
- What is the congregation's/school's plan for pastoral care and public worship during sabbatical? What is the school's plan to replace the professional worker during his/her absence? What responsibilities need to continue and how will they be taken care of?
- Are there any restrictions being placed on the professional worker following the sabbatical? (e.g. must remain for at least 1 year following sabbatical) The sabbatical is not a time for a worker to pursue another call or employment elsewhere. However, if during the sabbatical a worker prayerfully discerns that this call or professional ministry is not their calling, then the matter needs to be addressed in a forthright and God pleasing manner.
- What if multiple staff members desire a sabbatical at the same time or in overlapping times?
- Can the sabbatical be broken into two or three segments? Does it have to be three months? Could it be more? less?

#### 5. Following The Sabbatical

- A "Reentry Plan" is crucial. Expect some "anger" from members and staff, as well as feeling disconnected and out of touch. Both the pastor/professional church worker and congregation/school are in a different place following the sabbatical. It is helpful to "renegotiate" roles and expectations as a part of the reentry process.

- Submit a report to the congregation/school. This is a time for debriefing and reconnecting.

### **III. RESOURCES**

1. Alban Institute Consultant - 800/486-1318
2. Michigan District, LCMS – Commission on Ministerial Growth and Support

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