

## PASTORAL SABBATICAL

### The Need for Sabbaticals in Ministry

#### **RENEWAL**

A sabbatical is first of all pro-active in that it is a preventative measure that in some form is to be a part of ongoing renewal and health for people in ministry. It appears the church and ministry today is very much involved in crisis management and one of the goals of leadership is to prevent these life crisis experiences that often result in personal and professional destruction. A sabbatical is viewed as a nourishing pilgrimage and provides an opportunity for sharpening of focus before a crisis situation develops. It does not guarantee that personal or ministry crisis will not happen, but that when it does, there is a strength and health that will help the pastor deal with these issues more clearly and wisely.

#### **RESTORATION**

There can be no denying the fact that one of the most pressing issues among pastors is that of “burn-out.” While there is a great deal of misconception, generalization and abuse of this term, the fact remains that it is a real issue to be dealt with. Pastoral burnout is an area that cannot be ignored. The pressures and expectations of pastoral ministry are intense and often destructive. The church at large is facing conflict, both in terms of personal conflict with pastors and congregations and in issues of theology that are intensified by the cultural pressures in Canada.

There can be no denying the fact that excessive prolonged stress can reduce alertness, create errors in judgment, distort one’s ability and capacity to cope with the complexity of ministry and interpersonal relationships. Often pastors are left to struggle through with little or no help. This further creates anger, resentment, and guilt.

A sabbatical **will not** be the “cure all” to this issue; however it can be seen as a major step in the healing of burnout.

#### **LONGEVITY**

The issue of longevity applies to two areas. First there are increasing social and economic factors that are encouraging pastors to look at longer ministry commitments to a church. While these must not replace a theological foundation for pastoring, they cannot be ignored. There are always going to be situations where a relatively short pastoral stay in a church may be necessary and right, but there is a growing trend towards long term pastoral situations. While the intent of the pastor is not to discuss the pros and cons to such a trend, it is felt that sabbaticals can help to facilitate the possibility for long-term ministry.

Martin Saarinen points out that congregational life must be understood in some way within the context of a cycle. This cycle is not so much tied to chronology, but is factored by relationship and balance within congregational life. One of the keys to longevity in pastoral ministry is the recognition of this cycle by leadership and being able to appreciate and respond appropriately to this fact. Sabbaticals offer an opportunity in the

cycle of congregational life for congregational renewal and conflict resolution that left unattended will result in a major crisis.

They also provide for longevity in pastoral calling. The lack of opportunity for personal renewal and stress relief has led many pastors to “leave the ministry” to take up work in other job markets. While this may be factored by many issues, the provision of a sabbatical may provide the means for pastors to spend the necessary time to renew their calling and to allow them to continue in pastoral ministry.

### **THE SABBATICAL PRINCIPLE: BIBLICALLY BASED**

Acknowledged is the fact that no ministerial sabbatical is commanded in the Bible. Scripture, nonetheless, upholds the sabbatical principle for renewal. Richard Bullock makes the observation that “over and over the stories of scripture point to the renewing power of ‘Sabbath time’. The Sabbath is more than an afterthought of God’s action in creation. It’s a gift of rest from God, of renewal and hope.”

*(Following is a short biblical survey of the Sabbath principle.)*

### **SABBATH REST**

*Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy. (Exodus 20:8-11)*

The Hebrew word “Sabbath” means to “cease or rest.” Its biblical context is the Genesis account of creation. The Sabbath is the seventh day in which “He (God) rested (or ceased) from all the work of creating that he had done” (Gen. 2:3 NIV). From the beginning God gave the command to rest.

David wrote “He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul” (Ps. 23:2-3 NAS). A literal translation of “quiet water” is “waters of rest.”

After a prolonged period of ministry Jesus called his disciples to “come apart and rest.” Robert Randall commenting on this verse says: “Come apart and rest or simply come apart.” Jesus proclaimed “the Sabbath was made for man” (Mk 2:27-28).

The Old Testament records Sabbath rest as a normal pattern in Israel’s history even before the ten commandments were given (Ex. 16:22, 29-30). The observance of the Sabbath:

- demonstrated Israel’s faith in God. The Israelites trusted God not only to provide food miraculously but to also provide enough to eat on the Sabbath.
- Became a reminder of how God delivered them out of captivity in Egypt (Duet. 5:12-15).
- Became a uniquely Jewish memorial distinguishing them from other nations. It became a sign of their covenant with God (Ex. 31:16-17).

God established not only a day of rest but a sabbatical year as well every seventh year (Ex. 23:10-12, Lev. 25:1-7)... “the land would rest” (Lev. 25:2 LSG). After seven observances of the sabbatical year came the Year of Jubilee (Lev. 24:8-25).

As a nation Israel was directed by Sabbath guidelines. Their disobedience led to captivity which allowed the land to rest (II Chron. 36:20-21, Jer. 17:27).

## **SABBATH REST AND RENEWAL**

Just as the sabbatical year was a biblically based provision to restore a farmer's depleted field after every six years of planting and harvesting, a sabbatical period for those in the ministry provides time for rest and renewal.

The created world affords an example of the renewing process in the seasons of the year. Before new life can begin the cycle of rest needs to be observed.

The pace of modern society and pressures of contemporary ministry can blind us to the need for this rhythm of rest and renewal. Eugene Peterson explores this sense of rhythm in life:

“As we re-enter that sequence of days when God spoke energy and matter into existence, we repeatedly come upon the refrain ‘and there was evening and there was morning, one day...and there was evening and there was morning’ on and on six times. This is the Hebrew way of understanding day and not ours; evening and morning, one day. More than idiomatic speech is involved here. There is a sense of rhythm. Day is the basic unit of God's creative work; evening is the beginning of that day. The Hebrew evening-morning sequence conditions us to the rhythms of grace. We go to sleep, and God begins his work. We wake and are called out to participate in God's creative action. Evening: God begins without our help, His creative day. Morning: God calls us to enjoy and share and develop the works He initiated.”

## **A PRINCIPLE OBSERVED**

As a principle, a year of rest is allowed for the deacons on church boards after having served two three-year terms. This principle of sabbatical leave is also followed in many Christian organizations and secular institutions.

In keeping with the biblical principle of Sabbath rest and renewal, opportunity for pastoral sabbatical should be thoughtfully considered.

## **OBSTACLES TO A SABBATICAL LEAVE**

Even though the need and its biblical basis may be established, there are obvious obstacles to a sabbatical leave that need to be considered and addressed. An essential consideration would be ample advanced planning:

- The financial considerations need to be taken into account many years ahead.
- The plan (retreat, study, travel, etc.) should be planned one year in advance.
- Family, church members and board need time to enter into the spirit of the sabbatical rest.
- Denominational leaders need to be consulted and advised for counsel and practical concerns of the local church.

Generally, it is felt that there are two main obstacles in establishing sabbatical leaves: finances and security. These two obstacles apply both to the sabbatical applicant and the local church.

## **FINANCES**

Questions arise, such as:

- How will a minister receive a salary during his time off?
- How can a church fund an extended leave?
- How, with an already tight budget, could the church afford an interim pastor?

The following section, “Determining a Sabbatical Program,” will suggest solutions for these concerns with various funding options. Generally speaking, three months of sabbatical leave will require an accruing of money over a period of years to prepare for the leave.

## **SECURITY**

Questions arise, such as:

- Who will take care of the church while the pastor is gone?
- Will the pastor still have a position upon his return?

Guidelines would need to be established:

- The selection of the interim pastor should be a mutual agreement between the senior pastor, the board and the district superintendent.
- In the case of support staff (associate, assistant, youth, music, etc.) the board and the senior pastor should secure the interim pastor in consultation with the member taking leave.
- The duration of the interim appointment should correspond to the leave of the member.
- An availability list of credentialed pastors for interim positions would have to be consulted; candidates could be Bible College faculty (summer months), retired pastors, retired district superintendents, missionaries,... a compiled list could be accessed through the district superintendent.

There should be a stress on the importance of communication and understanding for all sabbatical preparations in order that both the pastor and the congregation benefit from, and not bemoan, the sabbatical leave.

## **Determining A Sabbatical Program**

### **ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED**

Remember that developing a sabbatical program will vary from situation to situation. The following is intended to prompt the designers of the local sabbatical program through a series of statements and questions in reference to key issues that should be detailed in a sabbatical program.

### **PURPOSE AND PARAMETERS**

The policy needs to detail the specific purpose of the program. The sabbatical is intended to allow the individual to pursue a plan of personal renewal and growth that may combine study, travel, relaxation, education and research. It is a time to refill their own life and calling after having given of themselves consistently so they might continue to be effective in service to the Lord and their constituents. It is not to be used to extend a vacation. It is not an opportunity to work another job during sabbatical to supplement personal income. Personal renewal, refilling inner resources is the focus.

## **ELIGIBILITY**

Who in the organization will the sabbatical program be made available to? What time frames are involved before eligibility for sabbatical? Will there be time of service commitments required after sabbatical? If the staff member leaves before taking sabbatical, will there be any compensation or portability (will vary according to funding plan)? If the staff member leaves the organization after the sabbatical, but before the required time commitment is completed, what obligations will the individual have to the institution?

## **LENGTH OF SABBATICAL**

What is the maximum length of sabbatical offered by the institution? How will the time off for sabbatical be accrued? How will vacation time be scheduled in relationship to sabbatical time? Who will be responsible to make that determination? After taking a sabbatical when will the staff member become eligible again?

## **SCHEDULING AND PRIORITY**

If there are multiple individuals eligible for sabbatical, who will be scheduled first? Those with the longest tenure would most logically be eligible first. How many sabbaticals will be allowed per year in a multiple staff situation? What congregational impacts must be considered? Only one staff member at a time being absent would be a reasonable expectation.

## **ACCOUNTABILITIES**

How will the individual and the decision makers assure themselves that the sabbatical reflects the stated purposes? Who must approve the application? What are the time frames for submission of application and approval and start time of sabbatical?

## **Financial Issues**

### **FUNDING OPTIONS**

There are several ways that may be considered. The options range from self-funding by the individual to a sabbatical that is fully funded by the institution. We are not recommending one option over another. Determination must be made in each local setting which option will work best.

### **SELF FUNDED PLAN**

An individual may choose to set aside a registered fund to provide for a Self Funded Leave of Absence (SFLOA). Revenue Canada recognizes such a fund. Some guidelines include the following:

- You must enter into a written arrangement with your employer for a leave of absence of at least six months.
- You must finance your leave by savings up to one-third of your salary.
- You must return to your job for at least the same period of time you were away on leave.
- Tax on money you contribute to a SFLOA is deferred for up to seven years.
- Interest on your contributions is taxed as it's earned.

The following issues should be detailed in the sabbatical policy and contract:

- Where will the funds be deposited?
- When will they be deposited?

- Who assumes responsibility for the funds?
- Who arranges method of payment during the sabbatical?
- Will benefits be retained during sabbatical?
- How will individual's share of benefit costs be paid to the institution?

Consultation with a tax accountant should be considered a must in developing the sabbatical policy.

### **DEFERRED SALARY PLAN**

This is similar to the Self-funded leave of absence. The difference is this: the employer administers the deferred salary. Where the money is deposited, how the interest is administered and tax considerations may differ.

The purpose of the deferred payment plan is to allow the employee to see their salary spread out over a specific period, in order to benefit from a leave.

### **JOINT FUNDED PLAN**

This option would be funded in a similar fashion as the Pension Fund. The institution/church would need to determine the upper limit of its willingness to match the funds contributed by the individual. The fund would be administered by the employer and agreements would need to be reached as to the disbursement of the accumulated funds should be the individual leave the employ of the institution/church prior to a sabbatical being taken.

### **INSTITUTION OR CHURCH FUNDED PLAN**

This option is very similar to the Self-funded plan. The major differences are that the institution/church funds the sabbatical and administers all funds. The institution/church may opt to set aside funds in a Sabbatical Reserve fund leading up to future sabbaticals. It may choose to include a line item during the fiscal year/s that the sabbatical/s are implemented. The manner in which the sabbatical is funded will of course be determined by the institution/church at its sole discretion. This option creates a natural incentive favouring the institution for the individual to remain in service after the sabbatical. Should the individual not remain for the required time and the individual is solely responsible for their leaving, the institution/church could include in its policy a requirement to be reimbursed on some pro-rata basis.