

Best Practices for Ministry Sabbaticals

"Just do it! Use your sabbatical to do more than intellectual learning. Spend time with people who can model and teach ways to grow in experiencing God. Go to places where things are being done, not just being taught. See who is actually doing the thing you seek to learn and spend time with that person or ministry."

Rev. Mark Borseth, Gethsemane, Minneapolis

Ministry sabbatical can bless both the ministry leader and congregation. The program is designed to be, in as many ways as possible, a shared experience, and the membership expects that they, both as a congregation and as individual members, will receive specific, tangible benefits from the sabbatical.

Start planning early. Many congregations will discuss a sabbatical for years and even formulate a policy. Once the commitment is made, a formal planning process needs to be initiated as much as 14 months before the scheduled start date.

Wheat Ridge Ministries strongly suggests that the ministry leader needs to begin the ministry sabbatical planning process with his/her congregation at least 12 months prior to sabbatical leave. This timeline has been very helpful for both ministry leader and congregation to "get ready" for the sabbatical.

The planning process should be led by lay members and presented to the congregation by lay members. This serves to reinforce the sabbatical as a shared experience (Wheat Ridge Ministries' literature specifically used the term "Our Sabbatical").

Write the ministry sabbatical plan down. If you can't write it down, you don't have a plan. Have clearly articulated goals that: (1) relate to the congregation, (2) are written in a way that the congregation can understand, and (3) are mission-centered. Also, if you have a good plan, writing the grant proposal is easy. If you don't have a plan, writing the proposal forces you to create one.

Communicate with the congregation. Start by communicating in general terms why the sabbatical is necessary to build a consensus, then fill in the details about activities, etc. Fourteen months before the sabbatical, the congregation was told informally that a planning team had been formed. Approximately eight months prior, there was a formal presentation of the purpose of the sabbatical at a congregational assembly meeting, and, at about the same time, information began to appear in monthly newsletters. Four months prior, a funding campaign was launched. About one month prior, the pastor-led discussion groups between Sunday morning services.

Educate. Educate, educate, and educate the congregation about what a sabbatical is and what the goals are. Pre-sabbatical mailings went to each family that included a letter from the committee, a weekly schedule of events and stated sabbatical goals.

Have high expectations for the ministry sabbatical time. It can be a life-changing experience for the leader but also a time for the laity to discover their strengths for ministry apart from

the ministry leader and their ability to shine in the extended absence. And while it is tempting for the leader to try and over-plan the sabbatical, it is best to keep the goals simple. One pastor first thought of taking a long trip during his sabbatical time. He realizes now that his time was much better spent reconnecting with his wife and family and spending quiet times at home and retreat centers.

A sufficient sabbatical time of three months or more allows time to establish new healthy habits and behaviors for the leader and to plant them into daily lives. Some of our most important experiences were in the closing weeks. We now have a benchmark against which to compare the state of our wellbeing over the course of our ministry.

A ministry sabbatical experience is not beyond reach for a congregation due to membership size, ministry context, or somewhat limited resources. Creative and shared planning with lay leaders who are committed to the concept of sabbatical and to the effort necessary to design an experience that is beneficial for both staff and congregation will make it happen.

Some other helpful insights:

- Make sure the ground rules and expectations for the ministry leader's absence are made clear from the pulpit as well as in written correspondence.
- The sabbatical is a sabbatical: the ministry leader must completely separate himself/herself from the congregation, physically, mentally and emotionally.
- Some congregations' commitment to a sabbatical is included in the ministry leader's call. The congregation should start setting aside money in a Sabbatical Fund at that time.
- The process of creating the proposal, presenting it to the congregation, and discussing it in pre-sabbatical congregational meetings and small groups was, in itself, a valuable exercise in self-evaluation. Establishing interim leadership roles for professional staff and lay leadership did much to strengthen the congregation.
- One obstacle needing to be resolved is the fatigue going into sabbatical from all the extra work of planning and preparation. Adequate time for planning is necessary and it should be expected that fatigue would be part of the entrance into the sabbatical time.
- Trusted peers can help you see if you might be trying to pack too much into your sabbatical – thereby possibly defeating its purpose.
- The blessing of sabbatical time doesn't just come from rest. It also comes with "difference" in one's daily life. Renewal was experienced through doing some different things – and almost everything was different!
- It would be good to have a ministry sabbatical policy in place before a specific individual asked to use it. Even proposing a policy can be a lightning rod experience for congregation and ministry leader.
- Some would agree with Roy Oswald's urgent plea for congregations to endorse a ministry sabbatical policy for its ministry leaders. A three-month ministry sabbatical

every four to seven years would produce an effective ministry in a congregation for 20 years.

- With the guidance of an outside facilitator our leaders are now beginning “Coming Back Together” round table discussions with ministry leader about sabbatical lessons learned.
- Coming back from sabbatical can begin the discussion of a new focus of the role and responsibilities of the ministry leader as well as a new leadership style that meets the present needs of the congregation.
- If the ministry sabbatical is for a pastor, choose a sabbatical interim pastor carefully. One congregation used a retired pastor who was already familiar with the congregation and it was a good experience for both.
- Consider having a "theme" for your sabbatical. We share the theme from a recent sabbatical grant recipient ... "Breathing Life into Old Bones" and it applied to both the pastor and the congregation, which was an older historic church.
- A helpful idea as you start planning your sabbatical is to send out a newsletter early in the process explaining the sabbatical.