

The Church and Pastoral Care (Sabbatical Policy for Pastors)

Scripture teaches us that we are to give honor to those who labor among us in the Word, I Timothy 5:17. In almost every case, when a pastor is called to a congregation there is a commitment made by the members to pray for, encourage, and support the man of God's choosing. This commitment of the congregation along with the faithful service of the pastor can lead to a long and fruitful ministry together.

There is a strong sense of responsibility within the Evangelical Free Church for the care of pastors and staff members. Congregations that take proactive steps to provide encouragement and support for their pastoral staff often develop a better working relationship. Those who study stress in the ministry tell us that careful attention should be given to ideas that address physical, emotional and spiritual fatigue.

While pastors should be responsible for their own rest and refreshment, the nature of ministry, as well as the make up of many pastors, combine to the effect that pastors often do not invest sufficient time and energy in developing themselves personally. Sometimes pastors do not take needed personal time, feeling responsible for ministry 24-hours-a-day, rarely finding two consecutive days of rest and holidays full of extra activity.

One way to encourage pastoral renewal and growth is for every congregation to develop a policy of regularly-scheduled sabbaticals for each of its full-time pastoral staff. A sabbatical can be a reminder that it is "God's church" and that the pastor needs refreshment and renewal just as much as the other members.

These proven benefits are worthy of consideration:

- A grateful pastor who returns to God's calling with renewed vigor, insight, appreciation, humility and understanding.
- A probably even MORE grateful pastor's wife.
- Pastor's children who may be thoroughly delighted at the change that has come over their father.
- A pastor better prepared for service in and to the local church, whose gifts are also enhanced for serving the entire kingdom of Christ.
- A witness to the community of the love and trust with which a Free Church congregation esteems their pastor.
- Sabbaticals also allow churches to draw on other resources, perhaps formerly unexpressed, when the pastor was present.

A sabbatical policy carries some potential dangers. Pastors should obviously not use sabbaticals for candidating or preparation for departure from their churches. Therefore, a pastor should not apply for a sabbatical unless he feels an ongoing commitment to the church. Without careful preparation and understanding by the congregation, the sabbatical may engender negative feelings toward the pastoral staff.

Preparing a Sabbatical Policy

Churches may include sabbatical policies in church bylaw, call letters, separate documents or policy manuals or all the above. They may further be negotiated as part of a pastor's call or ongoing compensation arrangements.

In formulating sabbatical policies, churches should specify:

- Who is eligible?
- When is one eligible?
- Length of sabbatical.
- Basis of accruing sabbatical time.
- What activities are permitted?
- What activities are not permitted?
- What plans and reports will be required?

Other areas for consideration could include:

- Relationship of sabbatical to other forms of compensation (e.g., vacation, severance pay/time).
- Commitment by the pastor for future service.
- Resources or funding available for supporting sabbatical activities.
- Plan for coverage during the sabbatical.
- Qualification of other types of ministry as sabbatical activities: e.g., professor-in-residence, chaplaincy training, special projects or missions.

Sabbatical Policy Considerations

1. A pastor may receive two months of sabbatical leave for every five years of service to the local church he currently serves.
2. Sabbatical not to be taken prior to five years of consecutive service at that local church.
3. Churches, at their discretion, can give credit for the pastor's years of service at a prior church, especially if no sabbatical time was given.
4. Pastors must submit a sabbatical proposal to the Board, outlining in general terms how sabbatical time would be invested. In a multiple staff church, the proposal should first be cleared by the Senior Pastor. Sabbatical proposals should reflect a balance of physical rest, personal recreation, intellectual stimulation and spiritual renewal. Sufficient time for family should be included.
5. Sabbatical time is separate from the pastor's yearly vacation time.
6. The pastor should report to the Board after the completion of the sabbatical, to indicate how the time was invested and what benefits were realized.
7. The pastor's full wages and benefits should continue for the duration of the sabbatical. Compensation should be given for unused sabbatical time.
8. The church should give appropriate recognition to both the commencement and conclusion of the sabbatical period.
9. The understanding of a "sabbatical" is that the pastor is relieved from all routine and emergency duties during the time granted. The local church leaders will handle routine and emergency matters.