

Five Guidelines for a Successful Sabbatical

by Charles Dickson

Too many ministers are running on empty. Burdened with almost unbelievable loads of duties, they are running out of both physical and spiritual gas. Consequently, congregations suffer from ministry by ministers who are experiencing stress, burnout, and possibly compassion fatigue. However, one solution has saved the ministry of many pastors and staff. Churches are beginning to realize how important it is for congregations to set aside time and funds to allow their ministers extended rest and study.

What is a sabbatical?

The sabbatical tradition began in the universities at the time when the university was part of the church. The idea was that 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 today. Unfortunately, it is not as alive or well in the churches.

Too often church leaders are reluctant to arrange periodic times when the pastor or staff member can become a student and worshiper for the purpose of refining and updating professional skills and refreshing the spiritual life and calling.

The sabbatical meets a mutual need for minister and church

Both congregations and their pastors and staff actually need sabbaticals from each other, and both can benefit from some time spent apart. Ministers and Church leaders should not see the sabbatical as a reward for good work or simply a benefit to keep the minister happy. Neither should they view it as an extension of the normal vacation period. Rather it should be an important part of the program of the church and the working relationship between the church and its ministers from which both will draw benefits.

Leaders in many major churches have noted that fatigue seems to set in after about six years and clergy tend to become restless. Unconsciously, pastors and/or staff know they need a change and a renewal; so many decide the way to meet these needs is to change situations. Unfortunately, too often this desire to change is supported by the people

in the congregation since the "honeymoon" is now over, the routine has set in, and possibly boredom.

Five guidelines for a successful sabbatical

1. Establish time parameters

Most congregations cannot afford to allow a year, with three to four months being more common. In addition, it should be spelled out which months are sabbatical and which are part of yearly vacation leave.

2. Plan the way you will spend it

The pastor must decide on a specific study or spiritual-growth program for the sabbatical period.

3. Make financial arrangements

Will there be a part-time or full-time salary paid? What about the costs of tuition, travel, and books? These questions should be worked out ahead of time. Some churches set aside a month's salary each year so after six or seven years they have enough set aside to pay for the pastor and an interim during the sabbatical.

4. Develop a realistic plan to achieve the goals

Often goals are too ambitious and the allotted time for the sabbatical does not allow enough time to achieve the goals. If goals are set that can be reached, the minister will derive a sense of satisfaction from the sabbatical.

5. Plan your reentry

Returning from a sabbatical may be more difficult than going on one. It may be difficult to get back in touch with the total situation all at once. Consider an adjustment period when returning. One wise seminary professor once remarked, "It is not possible to board a moving train with a perpendicular leap." Therefore, the pastor needs to run alongside for a while to catch up with the church's momentum. While advance planning was necessary for embarking on the sabbatical, it is no less important for returning from it.

The sabbatical is an important event in the life of both pastor and congregation. It is one of the most effective ways for clergy and congregation to develop and maintain a long-term relationship. It can be a vital ingredient in a mutually beneficial relationship. Before either pastors or church staff and their churches seek to sever relationships, they need to consider the mutual benefits of a sabbatical. The result of all

this may be that ultimately both will return to the Lord's vineyard with a new sense of refreshment, ready now to take on new tasks in His service.