



Pastoral Sabbaticals

Seeking restorative rest and longevity in ministry

Ministry is seen as, “a long obedience in the same direction.” This takes resilience, intentionality, and healthy rhythms of rest, including sabbaticals. Strategic, restorative sabbaticals are revitalizing and beneficial for those in ministry, their families, and their churches. In our view, they are a key component to ministry resilience. Implementing a sabbatical can feel daunting, so here are a few things to get you started:

Preliminary Considerations

- Begin with prayer, seeking guidance and direction. Prayer is always the best place to begin and should be a consistent practice throughout the sabbatical.
- A sabbatical is an extended period of focused, intentional, restorative rest. More than a vacation, it provides space for slow reflection, personal growth, and genuine renewal. It also provides a healthy, much needed break from ministry duties.
- A sabbatical policy is a good place to start. This policy needs to allow for sabbaticals frequent enough and long enough to be beneficial while being doable and flexible.
- Sabbaticals can have many goals. Will the focus be rest, recovery, research, retooling, or a combination? To gain clarity on your sabbatical purpose, start with the question, “What do I want to look like at the end of the sabbatical?”, then plan in that direction.
- To schedule the sabbatical, we suggest you look for natural lulls in the ministry calendar. While there is no “perfect” time, mid-winter and mid-summer seem to work best for many.
- We suggest a length of 4 to 12 weeks, depending on your circumstances and needs (with the idea that longer is better). Provide ample time for a clean disconnect, deep refocusing and reflection, then slow re-engagement. For this last piece, we recommend a lighter ministry load for two Sundays following the return.

Wisdom and Best Practices

- The best time to take a sabbatical is before you need one. This is preventative maintenance.
- Have a clear, detailed plan, but hold loosely to it. God will change it and take you where He wants you to be.

- Communication is very important! Prior to a sabbatical, church leaders need to clearly communicate the purpose and goals of the sabbatical. To protect the pastor, clear boundaries need to be established regarding contact with the congregation and church leaders during the time away.
- Under normal circumstances, we recommend that vacation should not be used to extend the sabbatical.
- The sabbatical may just be the start of a much longer healing or growth process.
- Establish clear sabbatical expectations and boundaries around the focus and communication during the sabbatical.
- We recommend having a sabbatical coach, someone to guide the pastor during the sabbatical, providing encouragement and direction.

Resources

- [*Sabbatical Guidelines*](#) by Navigators. A thoroughly comprehensive guide to planning Sabbaticals can be found online. Their “5 Sabbatical Phases” serve as a good tool to see sabbaticals in manageable pieces for planning and implementation.
- [*Clergy Renewal: The Alban Guide to Sabbatical Planning*](#) by Bullock and Bruesehoff. This is a good primer on sabbaticals, walking the reader through the entire process.
- [*Navigating Your Sabbatical: Purpose, Plan, Support*](#) by Keith Yoder: A good, simple sabbatical planning tool.

The NCD Staff is available to...

- help your leadership team to understand, embrace, and initiate the process.
- prepare the congregation for the sabbatical by assisting with church communication, fielding concerns and questions through short informational meetings, or through the preaching a message on the benefits of sabbatical for both the minister and the church
- provide or help find coaching for the pastor into and through the sabbatical, providing direction and accountability.
- help with pastoral re-engagement, teaching about boundaries, expectations, and the potential outcomes of the sabbatical.