

PRESBYTERY OF CHARLOTTE SABBATH LEAVE POLICY

Rationale

Someone has compared the life of a minister with that of a taxi leaving an airport. It is so loaded down with passengers and suitcases and other items that the car has a hard time even moving and is strained to the point of breaking. And the taxi may be only a few years old.

So it is with clergy and particularly parish clergy. They bear the burdens, the anguish, the pain, and hurt of their parishioners on a 24 hour basis unlike those of any other profession. As a result, many if not all experience to one degree or another symptoms of emotional collapse, stress related illnesses, and "burnout" adversely affecting the minister's personal, family, and parish life, and greatly diminishing effectiveness and personal well-being. For too long, this situation has been accepted, even tolerated as an inevitable part of the job.

The time has come to consider a viable solution to the peculiar stresses and strains the clergy encounter. It is a solution which has its roots in Scripture and in church tradition. It is the concept of Sabbath Leave, sometimes referred to as a Sabbatical.

Explanation of Sabbath Leave

A Sabbath Leave is a period of time provided for clergy to disengage from their regular tasks and from the stress of being constantly on call; ministering to the sick, troubled, and dying; and dealing with many other stressful situations. It has its antecedents in the Biblical concept of the Sabbath day and Sabbath year. It's a time for rest, reflection, and re-creation; a time for personal spiritual growth; an opportunity for renewed vision and commitment to ministry. It is also an opportunity for the congregation to reflect on the whole nature and meaning of ministry and the place of the congregation in that mission. The Sabbath Leave with its emphasis on rest, travel, study, and reflection is different from other times away for such pursuits as advanced degree work, terminal leave, or career assessment.

Scripture abounds with illustrations of God's leaders (Moses, Elijah, Paul, John the Baptist, etc.) spending significant time in solitude and reflection in preparation for and continuation of ministry. Our Lord Jesus went away into the wilderness for 40 days and nights to commune with God and prepare Himself for ministry. He took time by Himself on the mountain and out in the boat. He provides an example, a model for an experience whose time has come. Exodus 23 and Leviticus 25 speak of Sabbath days and years and Sabbath land years when the ground is untilled so that it can replenish itself. It's a time to refill and replenish the soul, to be refreshed in the Spirit with renewed dedication and vision, restored in physical health and energy all of which potentially can bring great benefits in renewed and more fulfilling and productive ministry.

Eligibility

The period of service providing eligibility may vary according to the number of years ordained, amount of time since the last Sabbath leave, or other considerations. The period being recommended would ordinarily come during the seventh year of ministry in one place. Individual churches and clergy could negotiate for a longer period depending upon the nature of the Sabbath Leave experience. Church professionals, which include heads of staff and associates, are to negotiate a three month Sabbatical during the 7th year and each subsequent 7 years exclusive of vacation and study leave.

Cost

The cost of the leave for the clergy will ordinarily be assumed by the clergy who will continue to receive full salary and benefits during this time. Costs for supply clergy or other expenses incurred by the congregation or governing body as a result of the Sabbath Leave will be paid by the church or governing body served. Those churches who would have financial problems in providing for the Sabbath Leave could consult with Presbytery. In addition, those churches who could not secure lay leadership within their own congregations might consider using elders trained as Lay Pastors or Associate Pastors who might be willing to preach one Sunday without honorarium, etc. Clergy, churches, and presbytery are encouraged to set aside funds each year so that resources will be available during the time of Sabbath Leave.

Planning for the Sabbath Leave

It is wise to engage the session and congregation or, in the case of ordained presbytery staff, the presbytery in understanding the rationale for the leave and in planning for same. Such issues as purposes of the leave, interim arrangements, and division of responsibilities in clergy absence, planning for re-entry after the leave is completed should be discussed. Upon re-entry, it is strongly suggested that a written report should be made by the clergy sharing the details of the leave as well as reflections on its value and benefit. The re-entry process provides a great opportunity to reflect upon the benefits that resulted from the Sabbath Leave. Such expected benefits as:

- Discovering the strength of lay leadership heretofore under-utilized
- New understandings of the concept of mission as shared mission between clergy and congregation
- Reaffirmation of calling to ministry on part of clergy and congregation with both being reinvigorated and rededicated to the work of the Kingdom

The ideal result would be for the congregation to see this period of time not just as the clergy's Sabbath Leave but as the congregation's Sabbath Leave also.

A very helpful resource on this subject is SABBATICAL PLANNING by A. Richard Bullock. It may be ordered from the Alban Institute, Inc. 4125 Nebraska Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20016

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