

**SABBATICAL POLICY**  
Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Enola, PA

May 2013

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## Definition of a Sabbatical

The idea of a sabbatical has biblical origins. The very root of the word is the same as that of “Sabbath.” Throughout the Old Testament, God instructs people to work six days and rest on the seventh. In Leviticus, God instructs people to allow the land to rest every seventh year – meaning no farming, no planting, and no harvesting.

To help instructors renew their passion for their academic specialties, medieval colleges and universities began to grant professors a leave of absence every seven years. Most colleges and universities continue this practice today – giving teachers the opportunity to rest, expand their knowledge, write, travel to places relevant to their area of study, and teach at other institutions.

Sabbatical Leave for Pastors is a planned time of intensive enhancement for ministry and mission. It is qualitatively different from vacation, days off, or continuing education. Sabbatical Leave provides an opportunity for the Pastor to take an extended period of time for study, spiritual growth, rest, skill development, research, and/or experimentation - all for the purpose of enrichment for continued service in the church. It is an opportunity for the individual to strategically disengage from regular and normal tasks so that ministry and mission may be viewed from a new perspective. Pastors find sabbaticals to be transformative experiences that strengthen, develop and renew their ability to continue serving in ministry.

## Length of Leave

Sabbatical Leave is recommended for all full-time Pastors who have served in their present position for at least six (6) continuous years. The recommended length of the Sabbatical Leave is three (3) to six (6) months. Accrued vacation and continuing education leave may be attached to the Sabbatical Leave. Time and cost of this vacation and continuing education may or may not be included. Upon completion of the Sabbatical Leave, the Pastor agrees to continue serving the congregation for a period of at least one (1) year. (Reference: The synod's *Rostered Leader's Compensation and Benefits Manual*)

## Why Grant a Sabbatical?

### Encourages Longer Pastorates

Congregations have difficulty realizing long-term goals without having long-term Pastorates. Adopting a sabbatical policy is one way to increase the congregation's chances of keeping its Pastor. Whenever there is a change in Pastorates, more than five years can be lost before development and growth can happen (including a few years of "burnout" before the Pastor resigns, a transitional or interim Pastorate, and a few years for the new Pastor to get to know the congregation and to lead them in developing a strategic direction).

## Contributes To Spiritual Growth

Spiritual growth does not happen by accident and it is difficult to accomplish when working 60-70 hours per week. If a Pastor is to provide dynamic leadership and deliver deep and challenging sermons regularly, s/he will need to get away for extended periods of time dedicated to spiritual development, including (but not limited to) reading, prayer, solitude and reflection. A sabbatical leave nurtures and feeds the body and soul for renewed ministry and gives opportunity for new vision and hope.

## Refocuses Ministry Approaches

A Pastor needs an astounding array of skills to be effective. In addition, parish ministry today is changing rapidly, and fresh ways must be developed to be on the cutting edge of these changes and to reach new and younger persons with the message of the Gospel. A sabbatical offers an opportunity for a Pastor to learn from others, to sharpen his/her skills, and to return to the congregation with new ideas and a new vitality for leadership.

## Prevents "Burnout"

People in helping professions tend to "burn out" the fastest, in part because the constant, intimate involvement with the emotional burdens of others is very draining. Many have come to refer to this as compassion fatigue. A common result is that, over time, a Pastor will demonstrate key characteristics of "burnout": exhaustion, cynicism, disillusionment, and self-depreciation, and they are likely either to seek another call or to leave parish ministry altogether. A regular schedule of sabbatical time every seven years or so will go a long way to preventing such results - for the well-being of both the Pastor and the congregation.

## Strengthens Congregational Leadership

While some ministry tasks require ordination and others call for specific training, many tasks of congregational ministry can be assumed by lay leaders. Granting a sabbatical leave to a Pastor provides an excellent way for members of the congregation to develop roles within the congregation that correspond with the gifts they have been given by God. The mission of the congregation is thus strengthened during the sabbatical time through sharing of responsibilities, teaching, visitation, and teams of worship leadership.

## Recommended by the Wider Church

Both the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Lower Susquehanna Synod have sabbatical policies for their staff members. The Lower Susquehanna Synod encourages congregations to have a sabbatical policy for rostered leaders, and to grant a sabbatical leave to a rostered leader every seven years of service in that parish. (Reference: The synod's *Rostered Leader's Compensation and Benefits Manual*)

The ideal result would be for the congregation to see this period of time not just as the pastor's sabbatical but as a time of renewal and rededication to the congregation's mission and ministry.

## Planning for Sabbatical Leave

To be eligible for a Sabbatical Leave, the Pastor shall present his/her proposal, in writing, to the Congregation Council for their approval at least one (1) year prior to the proposed beginning of the Sabbatical Leave. A final plan will be approved (six) 6 months prior to the sabbatical. The proposal will include the following:

- A detailed plan for and description of the proposed sabbatical program, including the proposed schedule, locations, costs, activities, etc.
- The goals to be achieved and the expected end-product(s).
- A personal statement as to why this Sabbatical Leave would be valuable for both the Pastor and the congregation.
- A statement of commitment to continue serving the congregation as pastor for at least one (1) year following the sabbatical period.

The Mutual Ministry Committee may assist in this process.

If the pastor's sabbatical leave plan is approved, the Congregation Council will appoint a Sabbatical Committee to begin preparations for coverage during the sabbatical period and to assist the pastor, staff members and committees in their preparations. (See "Sabbatical Committee" below.)

## Funding

During the sabbatical, the congregation is expected to provide full salary and benefits to the Pastor. Car mileage may be a negotiated item. Accrued continuing education funds may be used by the Pastor during the sabbatical period.

Ideally, the congregation will set aside funds each year so that resources will be available during the time of Sabbatical Leave.

The pastor is encouraged to research other potential sources of funding and to apply for them as is appropriate to the specific nature of the leave. Synodical staff may be helpful in suggesting potential funding sources. One such source is the Louisville Institute, a Lilly Endowment Program housed at Louisville Seminary.

## The Sabbatical Committee

A Sabbatical committee shall be formed to handle appropriate business before, during and at the conclusion of the Pastor's sabbatical. This committee shall be appointed by the Congregation Council and shall be comprised of two (2) members of Congregation Council, two (2) members of the Mutual Ministry Committee and one (1) Congregation member at large. One person shall be designated by the Sabbatical Committee to be the contact person for the committee.

Prior to the beginning of the sabbatical period, The Sabbatical Committee will:

- With the pastor, be in conversation with other local congregations (Lutheran and non-Lutheran), retired pastors, pastors on leave from call, and/or synod staff regarding coverage of worship and pastoral care needs during the sabbatical period.
- With the pastor, prepare a schedule of coverage for all worship services to be held during the sabbatical period. If possible, the same person or a minimum number of different persons will fulfill this responsibility, thus minimizing the training required and maintaining the continuity of our normal Sunday Worship. Determine whether these persons will be paid (some may choose to volunteer their services). Supply Pastors will be paid per synodical guidelines.
- Provide copies of this schedule with contact information to the secretary, Director of Music, members of the Worship and Music Committee, the Point of Contact Pastor and members of the Congregation Council.
- With the pastor, designate a Point of Contact Pastor who will be responsible for overseeing pastoral care needs during the sabbatical period. The Point of Contact Pastor, with staff assistance, will make arrangement for funerals, emergency baptisms or any other emergency Pastoral needs, such as providing the Eucharist in a Special circumstance, or other needs which may arise during the sabbatical period.
- Determine whether the Point of Contact Pastor will be paid (s/he may choose to volunteer his/her services), how much and how frequently.
- With the pastor and the Point of Contact Pastor, prepare a schedule of coverage for pastoral care needs ("On Call" pastors) during the sabbatical period.
- With the pastor, develop a plan for regular visitation of shut-ins.
- Provide copies of this schedule with contact information to the secretary, Director of Music, members of the Worship and Music Committee, the Point of Contact Pastor and members of the Congregation Council.

Prior to the beginning of the sabbatical period, the pastor, Director of Music and/or the Worship and Music Committee shall prepare the following:

- Proposed music, liturgies, hymns and other worship preparation for the sabbatical period.
- A schedule of worship services, dates and times.
- A schedule of Assisting ministers and Eucharistic ministers for the period.
- No weddings will be conducted during the period of absence without consulting with the Point of Contact Pastor.
- No changes will be made to planned worship during the sabbatical period without the approval of the Point of Contact Pastor.

The responsibilities of the Sabbatical Committee during the sabbatical period are as follows:

- Monitor worship leadership, pastoral care, and administrative activities. Consult with the secretary, Director of Music, Point of Contact Pastor and Congregation Council President as needed.
- Arrange for payment of supply pastors through the treasurer. Supply Pastors will be paid per synodical guidelines or as agreed upon prior to the sabbatical period.
- Arrange for payment of the Point of Contact Pastor, as needed, through the treasurer.
- Provide a written report monthly to the Congregation Council.
- Arrange for a "Welcome Back" celebration for the pastor at a mutually agreed-upon time.

The following items concerning pastoral care needs will be in effect during the sabbatical period:

- The congregation's secretary shall be notified (if during normal office hours) of a Pastoral need.
- She will, in turn, notify the Point of Contact pastor.
- Outside of normal office hours, the Congregation Council President or Vice President will be contacted and in turn communicate the need for Pastoral care to the Point of Contact Pastor.

The Congregation Council President in cooperation with the Executive Committee of the congregation will serve as an administrative support team during the sabbatical period and will make decisions as needed.

The pastor is not to be contacted during the sabbatical period to provide pastoral care.

At the conclusion of the sabbatical period, the Sabbatical Committee shall:

- Write a report to the congregation (see below).
- Assist the pastor in preparing her/his sabbatical report (see below).
- Recommend changes to the Sabbatical Policy.

## Sabbatical Reports

Within two (2) months of the completion of the sabbatical, the Sabbatical Committee shall submit to the Congregation Council a detailed report on how well the church functioned during the sabbatical period. This will provide an opportunity to reflect upon any issues that resulted from the Pastor's sabbatical pertaining to:

- Sunday worship
- Supply Pastors
- The Point of Contact Pastor and other Pastors on Call
- Pastoral Care Coverage
- Administration
- The congregation's ministry

Within two (2) months of the completion of the sabbatical, the Pastor shall submit to the Congregation Council a report of how the sabbatical period was used and shall share learning experiences with the congregation. The Mutual Ministry Committee and/or Sabbatical Committee will assist the Pastor in this process as desired.

These reports will provide an opportunity to reflect upon the benefits that resulted from the sabbatical, such as:

- Discovering the strength of lay leadership which previously may have been unidentified and/or under-utilized.
- New understandings of the concepts of mission between clergy and congregation.
- Reaffirmation of their calling to ministry by both the pastor and members of the congregation, with both being reinvigorated and rededicated to the work of God's people.