



PASTORAL  
SABBATICAL  
PROGRAM

# THE PASTORAL SABBATICAL

ONE OF THE GREATEST issues facing pastors and their families these days is that of personal renewal. How does one stay physically, emotionally, and spiritually fresh when confronted with the pressures of ministering in the contemporary world?

The Church of God General Executive Committee and the Center for Ministerial Care have worked together to address this concern. As a result, an innovative, care-giving program has been developed which is designed as a resource to help revitalize pastors and their families. The new program is called the Pastoral Sabbatical.

While the concept of the sabbatical has been successfully implemented in the educational and corporate worlds, for the Church of God it represents a new dimension of ministry.

The introduction of such a concept in the church requires further explanation. This booklet provides a detailed description of the meaning, function, and implementation of the Pastoral Sabbatical. The information is presented for the benefit of the pastors, parishioners, and those who otherwise may need an explanation of the sabbatical process.

# DEFINITION

FOR MOST PEOPLE, the term “sabbatical” is connected to educational institutions. However, in addition to academic agencies, many corporations, as well as a growing number of religious groups, are offering their workers an opportunity for an extended time away from job responsibilities for the purpose of reflection, renewal, and revitalization. This release from employment obligations should not be confused with vacation or sick leave. It is an entirely different concept which embodies the idea of a conscious focus on physical, mental, and spiritual renewal.

The word itself is biblically based. It is taken from the Old Testament Hebrew word *shabbath*, which literally means “rest.” The idea is first mentioned in the book of Exodus: *He said to them, “This is what the Lord commanded: Tomorrow is to be a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord...”* (Exodus 16:23).

As the program is envisioned in the Church of God, the following is a simple definition of the Pastoral Sabbatical:

**The sabbatical is an extended leave of absence from the pastorate for the purpose of renewing the pastor (and family) physically, mentally, and spiritually.**





In order to further clarify the meaning of sabbatical, the following comparisons are made:

### **What a Sabbatical Is**

1. It is a time apart from the pastorate.
2. It is a time for rest and reflection.
3. It is a time for renewed focus and vision.
4. It is a time to “pull things together” mentally and spiritually.
5. It is a time to be stimulated by new learning.
6. It is a time to concentrate on family relationships.
7. It is a time to evaluate the past and envision the future.

### **What a Sabbatical Is Not**

1. It is not an extended vacation.
2. It is not a resignation or dismissal.
3. It is not a sick leave.
4. It is not a time to pursue advanced academic degrees.
5. It is not a time to focus on negative aspects of life or ministry.
6. It is not a time to do things that distract from the central purpose of renewal.
7. It is not a time to seek a new pastorate.

Richard Bullock, in the booklet *Sabbatical Planning*, says: “A sabbatical gets one off the treadmill and provides an opportunity for renewal of vision and hope. It’s more than just a chance to recharge your batteries for another year. It can be a life and soul-changing time—a time when perspective and the Holy Spirit can come together.”

In summary, a pastoral sabbatical is a structured program that allows the pastor (and family) to take a leave of absence from his or her pastoral assignments for a specified period of time for personal and spiritual renewal, after which he or she returns to the pastorate and resumes the pastoral responsibilities.



## NEED

THERE IS A CONSENSUS among pastors that ministry today is more difficult than ever before. The pressures are greater, the expectations higher, and the resources spread thinner than at any time in the past.

In their book, *Pastors at Risk*, H. B. London, Jr. and Neil B. Wiseman speak emphatically concerning this reality:

Ministry hazards are choking the hope out of pastors' souls. They feel disenchanted, discouraged, and often even outraged. They question why they should be expected to squander energy on trivial matters when evil threatens to wreck the human race. Fatigue shows in their eyes. Worry slows their stride. And vagueness dulls their preaching.



A 1991 survey of pastors, conducted by the Fuller Institute of Church Growth, indicates that pastors work long hours, battle with low self-esteem, worry about the pressures on the family, and feel inadequately prepared to meet the demands of ministry. Following are some of the survey results:

- 90% of pastors worked more than 46 hours a week.
- 80% believed that pastoral ministry negatively affected their family.
- 33% said that being in ministry was an outright hazard to their family.
- 75% reported a significant stress-related crisis at least once in their ministry.
- 50% felt unable to meet the needs of the job.
- 90% felt they were inadequately trained to cope with ministry demands.
- 70% said they had a lower self-esteem now than when they started out.
- 40% reported a serious conflict with a parishioner at least monthly.
- 37% confessed having been involved in inappropriate sexual behavior with someone in the church.
- 70% did not have someone they considered a close friend.





These facts testify in dramatic fashion to the need for some kind of positive intervention that would allow the pastor to regroup and regain his focus on a periodic basis, but especially during times of severe crisis. There is no doubt that many pastors who left the ministry would never have made that decision if they had been given the opportunity for some time away from the pressures. Also, many pastors who have fallen because of moral failure would never have reached that point had they had time to recognize their vulnerability.

While emphasizing the needs of pastors, it should also be pointed out that other members of the pastoral family share those same needs, to a greater or lesser degree. Sabbatical planning should always include the family.

Whether as a gesture of appreciation for long-time service or as an instrument of positive intervention in time of crisis, the pastoral sabbatical is a highly effective ministry tool.

## RATIONALE

IS THE PASTORAL SABBATICAL really a legitimate ministry or is it a passing fad, a religious attempt to copy the corporate world? The truth is there are several important reasons why the idea of sabbatical makes so much sense and works so well.

### **Sabbaticals Are Biblical**

The concept is deeply rooted in Scripture. As has been noted, the term comes from the Old Testament idea of “sabbath,” meaning “rest.” In establishing the sabbath covenant, God stipulated that the people were to work six days and rest on the seventh (Exodus 16:26). God also instituted what was called the “sabbath year.” The people were to work the land for six years and on the seventh, they



were to rest from their labor in the fields (Leviticus 25:3,4). The sabbath provided a time of recovery for both the people and the land.

When looking at these references, there is a clear indication that God thought it beneficial to take periodic days, weeks, and even months off from specified labor for the purpose of rest and renewal. Though the practice of the stipulations noted in these passages is no longer adhered to strictly, the principle remains extremely important. Proper time must be taken and given for rest and renewal.

Also, as one reflects on the life and ministry of Jesus, it becomes apparent that He was a proponent of the sabbatical concept. On more than one occasion He withdrew from the constraining pressures of ministry, going to the mountains and desert places where He could find rest and spiritual solitude (Matthew 5:1; 14:23). With His encouragement and admonition, His disciples followed the same pattern (Mark 6:31). The idea of sabbatical comes from the Bible.

### **Sabbaticals Are Healthful**

After having worked on a committee that studied the health of a certain group of ministers, Robert Phillips and Thomas McDill came to the following conclusion: “The minister of the Christian gospel has responded to a call to one of the most exacting and stressful vocations open to human beings.”

In light of this, if not managed properly, ministry can be hazardous to one’s health. Stress brought on by the rigors of pastoral responsibilities can work like an undetected cancer. Slowly but surely it gains a foothold in the body until irreparable damage has been done. Unresolved stress can be very detrimental physically, mentally, and spiritually.



Studies have shown that an intentional break from the draining work routine can have an extremely beneficial effect. Even greater benefit is derived from a break that is extended to weeks or months. One way or the other, the body and the mind will eventually demand relief from the pressures of an unrelenting schedule. That demand often manifests itself in the form of a heart attack, a mental breakdown, a moral failure, or a life-threatening disease. How much better to take positive control of the situation and preempt that negative outcome by giving an infusion of new strength and spirit through an intentional “sabbath of rest.”

God’s idea of “rest for the land” is still practiced today as a primary principle of farming. The ground is left untilled at certain times in order for it to replenish itself. “Just like the soil, we humans need a sabbatical, a time to lie fallow,” says Dave Ellingson. “We require a time to receive rather than give, to get input rather than give output, to carefully nurture and cultivate our lives so that the soil of our spirits might be rid of weeds and have an opportunity to receive nourishment.”





## **Sabbaticals Are Productive**

One of the perils of becoming stressed out, burned out, or weary in ministry is a lack of productivity. Mental and spiritual distractions blur the focus of ministry and often bring about a noticeable decline in positive results from ministerial effort. This, in turn, adds to the stress level.

A lack of productivity and the reality of not seeing goals accomplished are particularly difficult for a minister to accept. There is in the heart of every God-called minister the noble desire to succeed and a strong drive to make a positive difference. When those desires are frustrated, the result can be the feeling that one is running a wearying, but joyless, marathon.

There is an interesting parallel between the negative feelings experienced by many pastors and those recorded concerning Elijah in 1 Kings 19. After what most would consider great spiritual victories, Elijah found himself deeply depressed, questioning his call and ready to resign. God's solution to Elijah's problem was to allow him to take a sabbatical—a time away from the pressures of being a prophet, while he was ministered to by the Lord. The result was that Elijah got back his spiritual focus and he became more productive than ever in ministry.

In the studies which have been done with those taking sabbaticals and in the pilot programs conducted in the Church of God, there has been a noticeable increase in ministerial productivity following the sabbatical. The period of time away from the regular work routine allows opportunity for reflection on the objective realities of ministry and for a refocusing on the vision and





goals for ministry. It is no wonder that many of those who have participated in a sabbatical program testify to a fresh anointing and a new motivation in their ministry.

### **Sabbaticals Are Edifying**

Probably the greatest single benefit of the sabbatical is its spiritual dimension. From the outset, God designed the idea of sabbath as a time for physical rest and spiritual renewal. By the time of Jesus, religious authorities through their man-made regulations had changed the meaning of sabbath until it had become a burden rather than a blessing. On one occasion, when Jesus was criticized for allowing His disciples to gather some heads of grain on the Sabbath, He made clear the purpose of the Sabbath. *Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath”* (Mark 2:27, 28). God intended that man should benefit from and be edified by this scriptural concept. Today, He is still Lord of the Sabbath. It is His idea at the heart of the sabbatical program.

During a sabbatical, a pastor and his family have the time to concentrate more on their *walk with God* than their *work for God*. One of the couples who participated in the pilot program spoke of their overwhelming joy in being able to come into a worship service with the singular agenda of ministering to the Lord and being ministered to by Him. They talked about having the unhurried time to practice their personal devotions, to pray, plan, and play together, and to read books they had wanted to read for so long. The result was, after this experience, they felt closer to God and to one another. Our work for God is important, but it should never take precedence over our walk with God.

These are just a few of the compelling reasons to consider the idea of a sabbatical. Those who have made that decision report their experience to be life-changing.



## PROCEDURES

PROCEDURES OUTLINED BELOW relate to two different types of sabbaticals: the tenure-related sabbatical and the crisis intervention sabbatical.

*The tenure-related sabbatical* is granted on the basis of tenure and is meant to be an incentive for pastoral longevity. Also, it serves as a preventative measure to help pastors and their families avoid burn-out. It is an intentional ministry that is carefully planned by the pastor and the church.

*The crisis intervention sabbatical* is intended to provide preventative and curative intervention in crisis situations. In cases where pastors (and/or family members) are debilitated by crises such as burn-out, physical illness, mental breakdown, financial difficulties, or family problems, a temporary leave from the pastorate could help prevent further escalation of the problem or possible ministry termination.

### **Approach**

With the tenure-related sabbatical, the procedure is initiated at the local church level. It is suggested that the Church and Pastor's Council (or a committee appointed by the council) become involved in the planning process. It would be helpful for this planning to begin at least a year in advance of the proposed sabbatical.

When it is determined that a crisis intervention sabbatical is needed, the state overseer should be contacted. This can be done by the pastor or by a designated member of the Church and Pastor's Council. The state overseer would make the determination as to the feasibility of the request and whether or not the Center for Ministerial Care should be contacted.



### **Length**

A tenure-related sabbatical should be considered when the pastor has served at least five consecutive years at the same church. A rule-of-thumb is to give two weeks of sabbatical for each year of pastoral ministry served. Generally, a sabbatical would not exceed three months; however, that decision should be left to the local church.

The length of the crisis intervention sabbatical is determined by the severity of the problem and other factors, such as finances available. It is important that some flexibility be built into the process to allow for on-going evaluation. One to three months should meet most needs.

### **Nature**

Both types of sabbaticals should emphasize rest and renewal. There should be a total disconnection from the church except for periodic exchange of progress reports and contact in case of emergencies. This generally means that the sabbatical would be taken at some geographical location away from the area where the church is located.



The pastor on a tenure-related sabbatical would have complete control of his schedule and activities. On the other hand, the pastor on a crisis intervention sabbatical will be given the help (medical contacts, counseling, etc.) necessary to resolve the problem.

### **Funding**

One of the most important principles underlying the sabbatical concept is that the local church would continue to provide the pastor and family with regular salary and benefits during the course of the sabbatical. Additional costs for housing, travel, and other needs would be the responsibility of the pastor. Hopefully, in the case of the tenure-related sabbatical the church would have planned in advance to take care of at least some of these costs.

With reference to the crisis intervention sabbatical, some emergency funds could be available through the state office, other local churches, and/or the Center for Ministerial Care.

Accommodations for ministerial families on sabbatical are available on a complimentary basis in several areas across the country. Information on these locations can be obtained from the Center for Ministerial Care.

### **Interim Pastor**

The selection of this person is extremely important to the success of the program. In the case of the tenure-related sabbatical, the church and pastor should consider this question in advance in consultation with the state overseer. For crisis intervention sabbaticals, the state overseer will work with the pastor and church in the selection of an interim pastor.

In the pilot studies which have been done, the use of retired ministers to serve in this capacity has proven to be very successful. There are several reasons for this. Probably the biggest plus for using a retired minister is the experience he would bring to the



position. Also, a retired minister already has his finances in place, so he does not require a full-time salary. A final important point in favor of using a retired minister as the interim pastor is that he is not looking for a church to pastor, so he is not a threat to undermine the pastor during his absence.

Other possibilities for the position of interim pastor are current staff members and qualified lay leaders.

### **Evaluation**

At the conclusion of the sabbatical, the pastor, a designated member of the Church and Pastor's Council, and the state overseer should fill out appropriate forms to evaluate the experience. These forms are available from the Center for Ministerial Care and should be returned to CMC for processing. A final evaluative report will be sent to participants by CMC.

In addition to completing the evaluation forms, it would be beneficial for the pastor to meet with the Church and Pastor's Council for dialogue concerning the positives and negatives of the sabbatical experience,

## **C**ONCLUSION

ALTHOUGH THE CONCEPT of sabbatical is new to the Church of God, many believe it is "an idea whose time has come." One fact is clear, pressures are greater on pastors today than ever before. We must do all we can to support our pastors and their family members. A sabbatical leave is an important scriptural way this can be done. While the sabbatical program is not for everyone and will not fit every situation, it is a positive answer for many who need some quality, structured time away from the pressing demands of pastoral responsibilities.



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