

A Treatise For Local Churches On Pastoral Sabbaticals

Introduction

When statisticians tell us that fifteen hundred pastors leave the ministry each month due to moral failure, spiritual burnout, or contention in their churches, a high percentage of pastors' marriages will end in divorce and seventy percent of pastors constantly fight depression, something certainly needs to be addressed. Have you ever considered that your pastor might need a time away from ministry in order to be refreshed and possibly even extend his years of service to the Lord and His people? In my study I am finding that Baptists are far behind some denominations in caring for their pastor's physical and spiritual welfare, many even having a "sabbatical policy" in their constitutions. Please consider with me, the concept of pastoral sabbaticals.

Definition

The term "sabbatical" comes from the Bible word, "*Sabbath*," which means "*to cease, to rest.*" In Genesis 2:2 it states that, "*On the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done.*"

In the fourth commandment of the Ten Commandments God said, "*Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it* (Exodus 20:11).

The Sabbath or sabbatical is referenced in many other passages of Scripture: a rest for the land every seven years called the Year of the Release (Leviticus 25:1-5; Deut. 15:9; 31:10); the setting free of Israelitish bondservants (Exodus 21:2; Deut. 15:12); and creditors required to release debtors (Deut. 15:1-6, 12-18) are just a few. It principally means to stop or cease from what you are doing.

Purpose

Primarily there can be two types of sabbatical – one for study and the other for rest and renewal. A sabbatical referenced within the academic world of education often allows for a period of private study with full recompense after seven years of teaching. There are occasions when a church may give a study sabbatical for their pastor to pursue further education. My primary interest is the consideration of the local church in giving a sabbatical to their pastor for the purpose of physical and spiritual rest, renewal,

refreshment and re-vigoration. A temporary “*stop*” or “*ceasing*” from his present ministry.

Many pastors experience what Elijah experienced after extended service for God. The victories, defeats, blessings and burdens over the years take their toll on body, soul and spirit. Elijah, exhausted both from serving God and running from the conflicts of ministry, found himself under a Juniper tree crying out to God to take His life. That was Elijah’s wish but not God’s will. God’s will was to restore him through rest and nourishment so that He could finish the work that God wanted Him to do. Elijah wanted God to take his life, but God wanted Elijah to go and touch a life. And that he did, when he called out Elisha to follow him and eventually take his place. God wants all of His servants to finish well. In order to do this, periodically, they need times of rest and renewal, just like our Lord did (Matt. 14:23; Mark 1:35), in order to fulfill the tasks of ministry.

Pastoral ministry is a 24/7 commitment to the care and nurturing of a congregation. The demands upon a pastor in today’s world are becoming more and more urgent. In the midst of such demands it is very easy for the Lord’s servant to lose focus, purpose and even a sense of God’s leading in the affairs of the church. Joy can be replaced by despondency and discouragement. Without a period to renew and recharge, a weary pastor may think that a change in ministry might be the answer. This is seldom true, for he will simply carry his “needy” soul to a different location. The pastor is a *giver* every day and there comes a time when he must *receive*.

The primary intent of a sabbatical (*Sabbath rest*) is to abstain completely from everyday work. It is a time to relax mind, body, and soul in order to be renewed, nourished, and free from worry about how things are going and what needs to be done next. It is not a time for running away from the problems and perplexities of life, but an opportunity to receive grace to face them, refresh fellowship with God, review past spiritual commitments, reshape commitments for the future, and restore the joy of salvation and the blessing of service to a holy, loving and righteous God.

Timelines

How long should a sabbatical be? A time of “Sabbath rest” for the pastor must fit each unique situation. No one plan fits all. This is why it would be wise for the Leadership of the church to establish a Sabbatical/Renewal Leave and make it a part of the constitution/by-laws of the church. It might even be wise to appoint a Sabbatical Committee.

The timeline should be decided upon by the pastor, deacons and congregation. Often it will be determined by the number of years a pastor has served the church. One denomination studied gives three (3) weeks after four years, five (5) weeks after five years, seven (7) weeks after six years, nine-twelve (9-12) weeks after seven years. This

is not in place of his regular vacation time, but in addition to. During this time the pastor's salary and benefits will continue as usual. One church gave three (3) months after seven years of pastoring and another three(3) months after twelve years. The longer one has been in ministry, greater the need for respite. One report stated that after six years both pastor and people start to get used to each other and both need a time to be refreshed!

Activities

What will the pastor do with all that time off? Well, he certainly should have a plan which will enrich not only himself, but also his family and the church. Ecclesiastes 3:1 states that *"To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven,"* and a sabbatical is a *"time"* for the pastor to think uninterruptedly upon such things. First and foremost, he should make it a time of rest and relaxation. He may choose to stay home or spend some time in travel. He may wish to visit other churches for spiritual refreshment and ideas for ministry. He may wish to catch up on his reading and writing. It ought not to be a time for sermon preparation, though thinking about future series might be permitted! It should be a time to enjoy his family and do things that he has had to put off. Possibly he might consider taking a missions trip he has wanted to do for a long time. There must be time for *"silence and solitude"* in the presence of the Lord; a time for seeking spiritual direction; a time to enjoy the beauty of life; a time for personal Bible study and prayer; a time to renew vision; a time to restore the joy and enthusiasm in his life for continued service for the Lord.

Staffing

How will we get along without a pastor? Actually, this can also be a positive experience for the church. If the church has an associate(s), much of the work will continue as usual except for the pastor's pulpit ministry, general oversight and personal involvement in ministry. If the church has a single pastor, his absence provides a wonderful opportunity for the members of the Body to exercise their gifts. A Sabbatical Committee could list all the activities that need to be cared for in the absence of the pastor and assign members to assist in carrying them out. Daily administration, hospital visitation, in-home calling, youth activities, prayer times, Bible studies and many other areas of ministry can be filled by lay people in the church.

The pulpit ministry could be filled by a retired pastor in the area, seminary intern, missionaries on furlough, associate pastor(s), and licensed lay people in the church or by contacting such organizations as Interpas, a group of retired pastors seeking opportunities to serve the Lord on a limited basis. This also provides an occasion for training people within the Body, maybe young people sensing a call into ministry, who will fill some of the roles needed while pastor is on sabbatical.

There should be one person, possibly an associate or chairman of the Deacons, who is responsible for reaching the pastor in case of an emergency. Any pastor worth his salt wants to be informed of such situations while he is gone.

Funding

How will we cover the extra cost involved with the absence of a pastor? How much will it cost? Where will the funds come from? Usually when finances are involved, regardless of the needs in a church, such questions are raised and need to be answered. As mentioned earlier, the pastor will still receive his regular salary and benefits while on sabbatical.

Of course, it is best to plan ahead because there will be some added expense during this time. The added expense would be primarily for pulpit supply for the number of weeks that the pastor will be gone. The best way is to establish a line item in the annual budget marked "*pastoral sabbatical.*" Each year that amount could be placed into an escrow fund and even gain interest until needed. If a church decides upon the arrival of their new pastor to give him a sabbatical in five years, and they budgeted \$100.00 per month, they would have \$6,000.00 plus interest in which to meet the need.

Other ways to obtain funds could be through special offerings, designated gifts, or extra funds on hand. God will provide if the people will trust! We always seem to come up with the finances to meet emergencies both in our personal lives and in the church. As the old saying goes, "*where there is a will, there is a way.*" There should be a "*will*" in the local Body to care for the needs of their pastor; after all, he cares for them on a regular basis.

A Suggested Pastoral Sabbatical Policy

1. All members of the full-time pastoral staff shall be eligible for a _____ month sabbatical leave after completing _____ years of service. After five additional years of pastoral ministry he shall receive another _____ month sabbatical.
2. The time of the sabbatical leave and its funding must be approved by both the Deacons and the congregation.
3. Sabbaticals shall not be considered as part of the pastor's vacation time and during the sabbatical the pastor will continue to receive his regular salary and benefits.
4. The Deacons will appoint a special task force to be known as the Sabbatical Committee with the following responsibilities: meet with the pastor prior to his

“leave of absence” to see how his duties will be fulfilled; see that these duties are carried out in the pastor’s absence; assign a person to contact the pastor only in cases of emergency; meet with the pastor upon his return to up-date him on congregational life.

5. Within 30 days after the pastor’s return from his sabbatical, a written report shall be given to the Sabbatical Committee, Deacons and congregation of the positive impact upon his life and that of his family and the things learned while away. He may also mention some of his activities as well as places he may have visited. An accountability report is only expected. The Sabbatical Committee should also evaluate the impact upon the congregation during the absence of the pastor.
6. No major decisions will be made on the part of the Deacons or the congregation in the pastor’s absence, unless he first is aware of them.
7. On the Sunday before the Pastor’s sabbatical begins the church family may wish to have a special service acknowledging the pastor and family and their ministry, and upon his return a special fellowship time welcoming him back.
8. In order for the congregation to benefit from the personal renewal of its pastor, and out of respect for their kindness, the pastor should not consider a change in ministry for at least a year, and hopefully not for several years!

Closing Thoughts

A large majority of our pastors having served a number of years in ministry have never had the privilege of a *“pastoral sabbatical.”* Granted, God has blessed them and given them the needed strength and grace but some refreshing times away could have made the journey so much smoother. In case you haven’t noticed, in all of Paul’s epistles to the local churches he addresses them by saying, *“Grace and mercy unto you,”* but to Timothy and Titus He says, *“Grace, MERCY and peace unto you.”* Evidently, just grace and peace will not do for preachers, they also need MERCY! It would be my prayer that these words might encourage the church leadership to consider a sabbatical policy for their pastors, and I am sure that is their prayer too!

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