

OFF-RAMP TO SABBATICAL

A WEST COAST TOOLKIT





Off-Ramp: (noun) A ramp by which one leaves a limited-access highway.

Sabbatical: (noun) (from the [Hebrew](#): שַׁבָּת *Šabat*, in [Latin](#) *sabbaticus*; [Greek](#): *sabbatikos σαββατικός*) is a rest or break from work; intentional, structured time away from ministry duties focused on “stopping normal activity” for the purpose of resting in God.

This toolkit is provided as a starting point to assist the full-time minister in the following key areas:

1. Planning a sabbatical
2. Working together and communicating with congregation and/or school leaders for a healthy process
3. Re-entry to ministry

This toolkit is not exhaustive. Consider it a starting point for your sabbatical journey and a key to open the door to practice rest and recovery. This practice – and the discoveries along the way – require your initiative. We recommend that you download this document to an e-reader or print it whole and take time to work through it slowly. (If you choose to read it digitally, all the links throughout this document and in the appendices are, of course, more accessible!)

Note: *The reason this process and resources are curated into a single PDF document are to address an issue we noticed over time: the vast, uncollated, and disparate options available for the minister considering sabbatical. The appendices are critical and arranged in a way that allows quick access, while also allowing you to “eat the elephant one bite at a time.” We feel that providing a single PDF document in toolkit form may help full-time, 12-month-employed ministers move past the initial obstacle of, “Where do I even start this journey?” Our hope is that it provides an easy first step for you to move towards a more sustainable ministry plan that includes regular rest.*

Several LCMS Districts have previously published their own sabbatical resources. This toolkit utilizes some of those efforts, while also offering specific content geared toward our West Coast ministries. All original sources can be found in the appendices.



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“It is not selfish to make such a request. Other professions have sabbatical policies. It benefits you and the congregation.”

INTRODUCTION FROM THE WEST COAST DISTRICT PRESIDENTS

Dear Friends in Christ,

“Immediately He (Jesus) made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone...” (Matthew 14:22-23)

Jesus had the habit of taking time apart. The Gospels describe His pattern of stepping away from the crowds and His followers and spending time alone in contemplation and prayer. It’s a rhythm to life that works for His servants, too. This toolkit, developed and curated by the staff of all three of our West Coast districts, comes with the prayer that it might be a blessing to our full-time, 12-month-employed ministers (ordained and commissioned), and our lay leaders who will support the planning and provision of sabbaticals. Ministry has become more and more demanding as the pressure of service in a challenging cultural environment and burgeoning technology continues to grow, and it’s crucial to meet these demands with fresh resources.

To our workers:

It is important that you see the sabbatical in a different light than vacation time. Anyone serving full-time in a front-line ministry leadership role (pastors, school administrators, early childhood directors, DCEs, etc.) should build sabbatical into their long-term work plan. When this toolkit refers to “minister,” it means you! Sabbaticals are an opportunity to fill your cup with renewed energy, vision, and purpose. It requires a different rhythm of life that seeks to prepare for the next step while balancing the need for physical, mental, and emotional recovery. It takes a plan and intentionality.

To our lay leaders:

A sabbatical is an investment a ministry makes in its leaders. It’s not a vacation or time off. It is a purposeful effort in retooling the skills and perspectives a leader needs to be the best they can be. Your support of this effort to the ministry you serve is vital and must be vocal.

As you consider the possibility of initiating a sabbatical, see yourself as following the Lord’s example. He knew what He needed, and He took action. Follow Him in the path ahead.

Serving the Lord and His people,

Rev. Dr. Paul Linnemann

President of the Northwest District of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod

Rev. Michael Lange

President of the California-Nevada-Hawaii District of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod

Rev. Dr. Michael Gibson

President of the Pacific Southwest District of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod





SABBATICAL – PURPOSE AND PREPARATION

What Is A Sabbatical?

A sabbatical is intentional, structured time away from ministry duties focused on “stopping normal activity” for the purpose of resting in God.

Healthy ministers include rhythms in their lives such as:

- A day of rest in every week;
- A week of rest in every three months;
- A month of rest in every year;
- A year of rest in every seven, 10, or more years of work.

This toolkit is focused on developing a plan for more-extended sabbaticals for full-time, 12-month employees such as pastors, school administrators, early childhood directors, DCEs, etc. It is grounded in a core understanding that the minister of the Gospel is learning and growing to serve God’s people from a position of rest in the Grace of God. Why? Not only is this at the heart of the Good News of Christ which rests on the work of God and not on the work of man, but this is also the only way for a minister to sustain long-term service. Plus: Practicing a “sabbath mindset” is the best possible way for the minister to model for others a life built on the foundation of God’s rest.

Why A Sabbatical?

The purpose of a sabbatical begins with “ceasing” so that the leader can be drawn into God’s sabbath rest (Hebrews 4:9-10). Secondary outcomes include relaxation, recreation, renewal, and holistic restoration of the leader in Christ. Further fruits may be any number of revitalized or new ministry options for both the leader and the people whom they serve. But it is important to clearly recognize the difference between inputs (the actual sabbatical rest), outputs (renewal and restoration), and outcomes (what happens in ministry when the renewed leader returns). The root of the English word “sabbatical” is the Hebrew word “sabbat,” which means “to stop,” “to cease,” or “to keep” (Genesis 2:3). A sabbatical is time set aside for contemplation and meditation on God’s word and God’s call — i.e., “keeping the sabbath.”

Consider these metaphors:

- An Oasis: A sabbatical allows the leader to pause in the journey of life to drink deeply at the oasis of God's grace.
- A Compass: A sabbatical allows the leader to "take a compass-bearing" on Christ, our True North, without being distracted by the challenges of the daily grind.
- A Ruler or Tape Measure: A sabbatical allows the leader to refine the "ruler or tape measure" the leader uses to assess purpose, gifting, family, vocation, and ministry.

Sabbath is woven like a golden thread through the Bible. Genesis 2:3 reveals that God rests – takes a sabbath – on last day of His creative work. Humans' first full day begins in God's sabbath rest (God created humans on the sixth day and rests on the seventh day). God models and commands sabbath rest for his people: "Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8-11). Jesus affirms the importance of sabbath rest saying, "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). The Biblical example of Jesus' own frequent withdrawal to a quiet place to meditate, pray, and be renewed is a model. See also: Genesis 1 and 2; Exodus 20:8-11, 23:10-12; Leviticus 25:1-7 (Sabbatical Year), 24:8-25 (Year of Jubilee); Psalm 23; and Ecclesiastes 3:1-8.

Historically, full-time church and academic professionals were given a sabbath (sabbatical) every seventh year. The observation was that academic professors and ministers were so worn out after six years of teaching and leading that they needed a year of rest, recovery, renewal, and re-education for their field of endeavor. The assumptions were that it benefited the professional person by avoiding breakdown, burnout, depression, or distress. It also benefited the institution through a re-energized and renewed cadre of leaders. Whatever the timeline may be for each leader and/or institution, what is of first importance is simply this: The practice of regular "ceasing" from all labor in order to rest in God is not considered optional in God's word. It is an expectation for all of God's people, and especially for leaders.

What Are Some Appropriate Elements To A Sabbatical?

A Sabbatical is:

- Intentional – have a clear plan for what you will do with the time away, and develop the plan over an extended time of preparation.
- Structured – structure your plan with a particular focus in mind that includes "stopping and ceasing" and engages your unique connection to resting in God.
- Time away from ministry duties – it needs to be said explicitly here: A sabbatical that includes remaining "on the job" or "at work" or "serving in the normal way" (even part-time) is no sabbatical. It may, indeed, still be restful in its own way or have some rest-focused components, but it is not a sabbatical.
- Focused on "stopping normal activity" – at its core, the biblical concept of Sabbath reflects the need built into all humans to "cease" or "stop" work, and rest in God. A sabbatical is focused on this "stopping" activity of the leader.
- For the purpose of resting in God – "purpose" also means "intentional." It requires a plan. Each leader is created wonderfully unique, and the modes of "resting in God" may be many and varied. However the plan may work out, the purpose — of "resting in God" — remains the same.



Elements of a sabbatical might include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Solitude
- Study
- Strengthening relationships with family and friends
- Relaxation
- Time to pursue a creative, relational, or leadership interest
- Travel
- Renewal moments and retreats
- Turning off all devices for weeks at a time (!!)
- Fill in the blank with what might help you find rest: _____

Sabbaticals are unique and should be tailored to the individual. It is important to discern – through prayer, coaching, and conversation with spouses/trusted friends/mentors/leaders in your ministry – exactly what your plan is and how you will implement it. These three are all modes of creating “listening time” for the purpose of having a clear plan:

1. Prayer – listening to God for His direction.
2. Coaching – having a skilled listener ask powerful questions that draw out where you are and where you want to go and grow.
3. Spouse/Trusted Friends/Mentors/Ministry Leaders – asking for specific conversations around “sabbath” and “sabbatical” to gain clarity from those who know you best.

Whatever the conversations, you are seeking clarity for what you will and will not be doing during your time away. You are also planning the steps you will take for re-entry into ministry service. Here are some examples of questions to ask yourself and in the company of the people identified above:

- A. What is the mutual agreement that I have with my ministry leaders on my sabbatical plan?
- B. Who has done this already, and what have they shared with me that is helpful? (See contacts in the case studies in APPENDIX 1.)
- C. Will the sabbatical be programmed or open-ended?
- D. What are the key activities that I am seeking during this renewal period? Examples: Spiritual growth? Theological reflection? Creative expression? Pastoral concerns? Research in a given area? Writing a book or a manuscript? Prayer, reflection, and meditation? Physical health restoration? A combination of these examples?
- E. What will be most useful to me during this time of sabbath?

Here are some examples of sabbatical plans:

- ❖ Encounters with other cultures, traditions, and Christian communities across the world (e.g. service, retreats, pilgrimages, mission trips, etc.)
- ❖ Research or writing on independent projects or as part of a formal seminar or academic program
- ❖ Directed reflection on personal and spiritual issues
- ❖ Recreation and rest
- ❖ Working on a ranch or other outdoor setting
- ❖ Engaging in activities that reconnect and rebuild family relationships



Who Should Take A Sabbatical?

Full-time Ministers of Religion (pastors, principals, DCEs, DCOs, deaconesses, school administrators, early childhood directors, etc.). This toolkit's recommendations are most applicable for 12-month employees. [If you are a 10-month employee (many teachers are), please stay tuned for the 2.0 draft of this toolkit in development for the Fall of 2024 which will include a section on healthy practices and tips for building deep rest into your existing schedule].

How Often Should I Take A Sabbatical?

This answer tends to be more open-ended due to multiple factors. We hope that your plans are not restricted by finances, lack of leadership to cover your duties, or other obstacles. Part of the planning process certainly requires working with leaders to cover for your ministry duties so that you can be fully "away." Congregations and schools should be part of the solution, and your time on sabbatical should be paid time off. We recommend a sabbatical of a minimum of three months for every seven years. Six months or nine months are highly recommended. Think of it this way: It typically takes about the same energy to pack for a three-day trip as it does for a seven-day trip. Longer periods of rest can be highly beneficial and require about the same amount of planning to set up. Note: The LCMS is structured on the polity of the local congregation, so much of what we recommend in this toolkit must be worked out locally in conversations and collegial partnerships with leaders in congregations, schools, circuits, and regions.

How Do I Plan For A Sabbatical?

Build a map that helps with your "trip plan." Planning for a sabbatical is a detailed process. Think of it as at least two initial steps:

- First, build a 30,000-foot view map that captures a) the essence of what you want to gain during the sabbatical, and b) what spiritual and emotional destinations you'd like to reach by the end.
- Second, initiating all the "pre-activities" that ultimately get you "out the door" on sabbatical.

The big picture map and the detailed "trip plan" work together to outline why you want to do it, where you want to go, what you want to do, how the congregation can support you, how you can support the congregation, who is with you on the trip, and what the follow-up after your return will be.

Coaching

We invite you to use district coaching support in your planning for sabbatical. *Sometimes it helps to have someone who is completely outside your situation, fully in your corner, and skilled at listening and asking powerful questions.* Each district provides coaching support in a specific manner.

NOW District for pastors and DCEs, DCOs, deaconesses: <https://calendly.com/dustkunkel/nowdistrictcoaching>

NOW District Coaching for Educators and Administrators: jims@nowlcms.org

CNH: Contact the CNH District Office/Joe Robb at 925-245-4000 or www.cnh-lcms.org

PSD: Contact the PSD District Office at 949-854-3232 or www.psd-lcms.org

Leadership Conversations

- ❖ Listen to Ministers Who Have Completed a Sabbatical

There are a number of leaders who shared their stories with us as we put this toolkit together, and they agreed to serve as resources for you. Reach out to them! Find their information in APPENDIX 1.



❖ Listen to Your Local Leadership

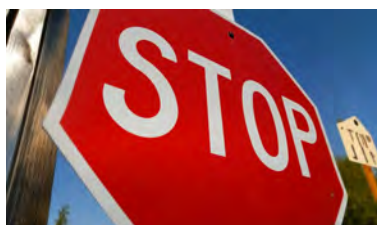
We recommend identifying whether your congregation already has a sabbatical policy in place. If it does, you will need to read through it carefully in order to craft a plan that fits the parameters. If the policy does not seem beneficial, it is appropriate to revisit it with your leadership. Note: If your congregation does not have a policy, you will want to approach the topic with your council/board/elders and suggest one be included in your bylaws (see *APPENDIX 3 for some examples of existing policies we have curated from ministries in the NOW District*).

What is the process of requesting, receiving, and taking a sabbatical?

Once you have written a draft sabbatical plan, present it to your elders, council, staff, etc. You may need to alter your plan in order to fit specific considerations, but don't lose sight of what you hope to accomplish. Some congregations develop sabbatical work groups/committees to assist with this process (see examples in *APPENDIX 4 at the end of this toolkit and [on our website](#)*). This can, and should be, a project for the whole congregation.

What is the expectation when you return from your sabbatical?

It is critical to have a plan in place for when you return. Expect some anxiety within yourself and from members and staff. You may feel disconnected and out of touch. This is normal! Both the pastor/professional church worker and congregation/school are in a different place following the sabbatical. Keep an attitude of celebration at the forefront: Everyone has changed — we're here to celebrate what God has done in our lives while apart. It is helpful to set specific meetings with your leaders with an agenda to revisit everyone's goals and expectations as a part of the re-entry process. It is wise to submit a report to the congregation/school of your key learnings from your time away. We recommend you separate sharing what you learned while on sabbatical from what you will do about it/plans for what is next. This is a time for celebrating each party and the changes everyone has gone through: for debriefing and reconnecting, for learning from one another, and for sharing "highs" and "lows" from your time apart.



“Long term pastor - congregation relationships are a great blessing to the church and to their communities. They may also become unhealthy if we get into a rut. One way to sustain a pastor in ministry is through sabbatical.”



SABBATICAL – FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQs)

I don't take regular time off. How do I even start to do this?

The rhythm of sabbath does not have to be every few decades! It is more appropriate to think of a regular rhythm that draws you into stopping work and resting in God's love for you in Christ. Many ministers struggle with this challenge of building the rhythm of rest into their lives. You're not alone. Eat this elephant one bite at a time! Consider starting simply:

- Invite at least one trusted advisor into this area of your life. We recommend two: a mentor and a coach. A mentor is someone you've identified who "does the rhythm of sabbath well" and can pour this practice and learning into you. It may be another ministry leader in your area, but a mentor can also be further away. All it takes is an openness on your part to meet consistently (in person, on the phone, or over Zoom) to receive wisdom that the mentor is willing to share. A coach is someone skilled at asking you powerful questions and drawing out where you are and where you want to go. Both are important, but for different reasons.
- Remember that you can access tele-coaching from a number of leaders, including "getting started on sabbatical" coaching sessions through your own district: **NOW** (<https://calendly.com/dustkunkel/nowdistrictcoaching>), **PSD** (psd-lcms.org), **CNH** (cnh-lcms.org).
- Be transparent with your mentor and/or coach about what you believe you need. Pray together.
 1. Set a plan to begin to implement a basic rhythm of ceasing and resting into your life beginning with your next month.
 2. Set a time to review how it went.
 3. Use the new learning from this practice to set a second set of goals that includes a larger practice of sabbatical in your life.
 4. In other words: This is a practice (not a mental theory alone) that requires planning and effort to implement into our lives. May the Lord bless your attention to this!

Is this toolkit for me? I'm not ordained, but I work full-time in front-line ministry (administration, directing, etc.). Yes! There is great value in taking a sabbatical for DCEs, school administrators, early childhood directors, and other full-time, 12-month employees who suffer from burnout. This toolkit is just as much for you as it is for ordained ministers who serve full-time.

My congregation/school leaders say I can take a sabbatical, but it has to be connected to something we are doing in the congregation/school. Is that required?

Although many leaders return to their congregations or schools with key learnings that are of specific value to specific ministries, that is not the primary purpose of taking a sabbatical. One way to describe the nature of a sabbatical is that it is attending to the foundations of the leader by restoring and strengthening the core ability to rest in Christ – and thereby do their best work. It is entirely appropriate for a leader to be focused on topics and time away that has nothing to do with their work duties “back home.” In fact, research and scripture both suggest that this focus on “ceasing in order to rest” is the primary purpose for a sabbatical that yields best results.

We have few funds to make this happen. How will we ever do it? There are funding options available (see APPENDIX 6). But the first step is making sure that the conversation is a regular agenda item on the table with your leaders. If you run into pushback in this area, consider your district staff as a support structure for these crucial conversations with your leaders.

Who’s responsible for making sure I take a sabbatical? Who is responsible when two people dance? Sabbatical requires your initiative. However, both the ministry leaders in your congregation/school and you, the called worker, are responsible. The best approach is to work together on the plan. Share this toolkit with your leaders, and start the conversation.

What if I don’t know how to stop working? All of us struggle with knowing when to stop. Ministry is serving people, and people always have needs. However, learning good boundaries allows the minister to “keep the bad stuff out,” and “let the good stuff in” (a core value shared by Henry Cloud in his masterwork on self-care titled, [“Boundaries”](#)).

Who will “cover” for me while I’m gone? This requires planning and footwork with leaders both in your ministry and in your region. We recommend your leadership work with you on identifying and inviting leaders to help while you are away.

Is this really necessary? You’ve gotten this far in the toolkit, so chances are that you are motivated to take a sabbatical! Yes, it is necessary. In fact, it is critical to sustaining your ministry service. We direct you back to the first section of this toolkit for all the reasons. Secondly, ask your spouse or a close friend; sometimes, they may have insight into how necessary this sabbatical may be for you.

What makes coaching so valuable in the sabbatical planning and re-entry process?

This is the perfect time to begin a coaching relationship with a skilled and well-trained coach.

- ❖ A coach is confidential, and outside your normal ministry relationships.
- ❖ A coach will create open and reflective space for you to think out loud.
- ❖ A coach will ask powerful questions and will listen carefully.
- ❖ A coach will be one extra person “in your corner” outside your day-to-day ministry life.
- ❖ A coach will help you ignite your vision.
- ❖ A coach will encourage you to consider changes to your behavior.
- ❖ A coach will consistently invite you to follow through on the things that mean the most to you.
- ❖ A coach does not tell you what to do.
- ❖ A coach draws out of you what you desire, helps you set targets, and supports your follow-through.

NOTE: If you would prefer to work with someone other than the district coach, all you have to do is ask. We are working on a curated list of top-quality, vetted, ministry coaches. There are a variety of options available to make sure that you are matched well with a coach. Just reach out.





APPENDIX 1 – CASE STUDIES WITH CONTACT INFORMATION

These are real reports by LCMS pastors from across the three West Coast districts. Pastors were invited to provide their contact information if they wished to be available as a resource. Please consider reaching out to them for further information as needed. (Note: since this toolkit is “Version 1.0,” and will continue to be curated and expanded each year, our hope in future versions of this document is to also provide contacts from administrators, DCEs, early childhood directors, etc.).

Rev. Robert Banken – NOW District

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206-363-0110

Rev. Robert Banken – NOW District

Length and date of sabbatical: Six weeks – 1991

Why did you take a sabbatical?

I had been a pastor for 29 years and had not taken one. I had been inspired by a slide presentation at a regional pastors conference from someone with ELIC (English Language Institute China). We called it a mission leave. We had been serving at Good Shepherd, Tacoma for nine years.

How did you come to the decision that it was the right thing for you?

I was inspired to try a foreign mission venture and my wife Gloria shared in the excitement.

What did you do during your time away?

We had a week of orientation at Azusa Pacific College in California and then were assigned with six others to The Institute of Iron and Steel in the province of Inner Mongolia in China. Teachers from all over China who taught in Iron and Steel cities came to Boutow to be with us. They taught English but most had never been with a native teacher. Most were a part of the first wave of people to go to college following the cultural revolution. They were very eager to learn and loved the opportunity to be with us. It was a mountain-top experience for all of us.

How did it help you?

It affirmed us in our Christian walk and witness. Churches were just newly opened, and we went and some students went with us. They could interpret for us. The new churches were packed.

How did you cover your ministry responsibilities during the time away?

I had an associate pastor who covered.

What influence did your sabbatical have on your life?

It gave us love for China and eventually led to my being called to pastor the new International church in Beijing, The Congregation of The Good Shepherd, in 1995.

What do you wish to share with all pastors considering taking a sabbatical?

Yes, a break from the usual demands of pastoring is inspiringly refreshing.

What are the top resources that helped you prepare for sabbatical?

Prayer, consultation with others, and orientation provided by ELIC.

“A break from the usual demands of pastoring is inspiringly refreshing.”



Rev. James Markus – NOW District

Length and date of sabbatical: Three months (and added an additional month of vacation) – 2020

Why did you take a sabbatical?

This is what I wrote in my request to the congregation:

After serving (what will be) 11 years at Mt. Olive and 14 years in ministry, it seems like a good time to step out of ministry for an extended period of time for the following reasons:

- Long term pastorates can be a great blessing to the church, continuity, stability, etc., but they can also be a problem if we get into a rut. One way to prolong a pastor in ministry is by way of a sabbatical.
- Last Lent I asked for and received help. That was a sign that:
 - A. I find myself spiritually dry much of the time.
 - B. Ministry feels too heavy at times.
 - C. Doing the work of God (of full-time ministry) may be hindering the work of God in me.
 - D. In addition, the congregation may be experiencing a comfortable rut.

What did you do during your time away?

This is from my report to the congregation following the sabbatical:

Renewal of Relationships: Visited friends and family in the Midwest, Seattle, and Oregon

Re-siding of Home: I experienced a different type of work as we re-sided our home.

Relaxation: Visit to Mt. St. Helens, 3 days at the ocean, 3-week trip to France, golf, camping

Renewal: 3 days on a personal retreat reading through the gospel, a weekend at the Taize Religious Community in France

Education: 3-day Leadership Conference, 3-day Circuit Counselors Training, 3-day Pastors' Conference, 2 books read, talks with four different pastors about ministry challenges

How did it help you?

- I learned that the problem I have with the pace of life is not the fault of ministry, but of my own approach to lifestyle management.
- I had the opportunity to rethink my priorities and re-evaluate what I can and cannot accomplish.
- I am full of new sermon and ministry ideas.
- I have a sense of refreshment as I return.
- You benefited through the opportunity of hearing God's Word from five different pastors.
- Some of you grew in new ways as you served in new ways.
- The long-term benefits remain to be seen.

How did you cover your ministry responsibilities during the time away?

This was the real blessing. There were three retired pastors who each covered full pastoral duties for a month.

One of our members had a wonderful "mother-in-law" apartment where they could stay. The congregation stepped up to cover the extra salaries for that time. The congregation understood that I would not be covering any pastoral emergencies or funerals.

What do you wish to share with all pastors considering taking a sabbatical?

It is not selfish to make such a request. Other professions have sabbatical policies. It benefits you and the congregation. It would be helpful if the congregation established a sabbatical policy and would have sabbatical costs as part of the annual budget put into a designated fund.



Rev. Jeff Mueller – NOW/CNH District

Length and dates of sabbaticals: Three months – 2002 and 2016

Why did you take a sabbatical?

In my 30 years as an ordained pastor, I have taken two distinct three-month sabbaticals 14 years apart. I attempted to take a third sabbatical in the seventh year between those two, but it didn't work out. The simple answer for my first sabbatical is I was quickly approaching a physical, emotional, and spiritual burnout due to working too many hours and dealing with lots of stress as the church of my first call grew a mile wide and an inch deep. The main reason for my second sabbatical 14 years later was I had grown in my wisdom and experience about running the race for Jesus as a steady marathon and not a full-on sprint and knew that another sabbatical would be very healthy and wise for the long run service to my Lord and His church.

How did you come to the decision that it was the right thing for you?

My church elders insisted I take my first sabbatical after seven years of intense ministry as I was quickly burning out. That first sabbatical truly did make all the difference on whether I was going to be a long-time servant of the Word or just another flash in the pan.

What did you do during your time away?

On our first sabbatical, since it was necessary to take it as soon as possible, we mostly spent time with family in other states, camped a lot and stayed a few weeks in resorts. There was little time to plan a thorough program of spiritual renewal. The second sabbatical was the exact opposite. It was planned for months with the partnership of the congregation's leadership, with clear and dynamic vision for how the sabbatical would not only benefit my wife and me holistically, but also the entire congregation. We received a large sabbatical grant that covered all expenses for our travels and for the three-month guest pastor. It was an incredible spiritual experience for the congregation and us.

How did it help you?

The first sabbatical gave me the time to rest and recover from a very long time of intense ministry work and stress. The second sabbatical fulfilled far more than that. It enriched my understanding of the Great Reformation and our founding servant-leader, Martin Luther, as well as my own family's rich ministry heritage in Germany and America.

How did you cover your ministry responsibilities during your time away?

For my first sabbatical, we had a large pastor staff to cover all my duties. On my second sabbatical, due to the generous Clergy Renewal Sabbatical Grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc., we were able to cover the expenses for a retired pastor to serve every Sunday and often during the week for the entire three-month sabbatical. (See APPENDIX 6 for more info on this Lilly Grant opportunity.)

What influence did your sabbatical have on your life?

As I shared earlier, the first sabbatical saved me from walking away from the ministry and seeking an alternative career. The second sabbatical filled me with a deep and lasting gratitude to God for the ministry heritage He placed me in and continues to be a source of motivation as I serve Him for years to come.

What do you wish to share with all pastors considering taking a sabbatical?

If you have not had at least a three-month break from active full-time pastoral ministry in the last six or seven years, do it! I am a huge cheerleader for pastoral self-care and am available if you need advice on how to go about the planning, funding, and implementation of a sabbatical. Just shoot me an email at

pastorjmueller@gmail.com.



Rev. Peter Mueller – NOW District

Length and date of sabbatical: 12 weeks – Just beginning it in July 2023

Why did you take a sabbatical?

To rest, renew, and rejuvenate personally, spiritually, and professionally. This would be important anytime, but after three years including the pandemic and purchasing a second campus while being part of closing a neighboring ministry, a sabbatical will be especially timely.

How did you come to the decision that it was the right thing for you?

I know that deep rest yields big benefits in terms of renewed energy, joy, and vision, and I want more of that. I also have had several friends who are pastors go on sabbaticals and have very positive experiences.

What did you do during your time away?

As my sabbatical is just beginning as I write this, here's the basic plan that we shared with our congregation (it refers to "we" and "our" because my wife is also on our staff, and we are taking a sabbatical together):

REST: Extended time to decompress from the busyness of life and ministry, especially from the last three years of exceptionally high workloads and stress levels related to ministry in the pandemic and with Hope's work with Seattle Lutheran High School.

GOING DEEPER with GOD: Extended time studying Scripture, being in prayer, pursuing a renewed and enriched spiritual life.

INVESTING in our MARRIAGE: Attending a two-day marriage enrichment retreat with a counselor.

TIME with EXTENDED FAMILY: Attending a family wedding out of state.

TIME with IMMEDIATE FAMILY: Traveling to Germany; spending time with relatives in Germany; visiting places of cultural, historical, and spiritual significance; hiking in the Alps; taking our son to college out of state.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: Increasing our ministry competency and skills through online courses, reading books, writing and reflection, conversations with mentors.

How did it help you?

We'll see when it's over. I'm hopeful I will experience deep rest, deep connection with God in prayer and study of Scripture, great joy personally and with my family in the beauty of God's creation and more.

How did you cover your ministry responsibilities during the time away?

Six different people preaching - two retired pastors, our DCE, a rostered school theology teacher, our head Elder, and District President Paul Linnemann. Three neighboring pastors and one retired pastor agreed to be on standby to provide pastoral care as needed along with two Elders. Other staff are covering general administrative responsibilities.

What do you wish to share with all pastors considering taking a sabbatical?

It's a lot of work to get ready - don't underestimate that. However long you think it will take to transition out, double or triple that amount of time. If you have multiple ministry staff, work with your board to ensure that you have a written sabbatical policy that articulates which categories of staff are eligible for a sabbatical and when and how. Talk with other pastors who have gone on a sabbatical to get ideas of how to spend your time. If you plan far enough in advance (18 months), consider applying for a sabbatical grant from the Lilly Foundation (your board will need to be involved in this as well). I didn't apply for this, but grants of \$40,000+ are available for successful applicants. Every church should consider creating a policy to offer a sabbatical grant to all of their leadership staff at a regular interval. The benefit to both worker and congregation will be more than worth it.



Rev. Dan Wehrspann – NOW District

Length and date of sabbatical: 13 weeks – June to August 2006

How did you come to the decision that it was the right thing for you?

Prayer and conversation with my wife (who was to join me) and information from NOW District

What did you do during your time away?

Served in Southern India - as chaplain at Bethesda Hospital (11 weeks), and at the Seminary (in Nagercoil) teaching ESL classes to prospective students (1 week)

How did it help you?

Academically - not a great growth area for me but great teaching opportunity for my daughter, who agreed to join me at a later date (more on the circumstances in a later paragraph). Experientially - fantastic growth! Learning to deal with the Dalits; learning to preach on a moment's notice; being welcomed as the "white angel" on the hospital wards; leading daily chapel services for staff and patients; being part of the medical care team; being a voice to patients and staff who at times struggled with their activities; bonding with my 26-year-old daughter.

How did you cover your ministry responsibilities during the time away?

Congregation contracted a pastor for regular care and special emergencies; purchased cell phone in India and communicated a weekly 'letter' to the congregation for prayers of strength, healing, specific situations I would be encountering each week. The "podcast" (before they existed) was played at the Sunday service each week. Had printed daily devotions for the time we were apart, and 'worshiped with the congregation' on a daily basis, for those who chose to do so - and there were many who did. To my surprise, the congregation also sent along an envelope that said "do not open until India" which included Scriptures, thoughts, prayers, encouragement, etc.

What influence did your sabbatical have on your life?

Greatly enhanced my understanding of myself in terms being a minority (white) - and vaguely (I'm sure) still learning what race conflicts can mean; thoroughly immersed myself in the ministry; got to know a whole new "people group" with whom I could share my "back-home" ministry; intended to share the time with my wife, Lin, but she became unable to join me due to a bout with breast cancer (she died in November the same year), so I was joined by my daughter, Kristi - a Lutheran school teacher who did education pieces throughout our time together; was led to provide a challenge to my Oregon congregations (past and present) to provide a new laundry for Bethesda - and after Lin died, all financial gifts were forwarded to the laundry project. And a wonderful opportunity to bond with my daughter.

What do you wish to share with all pastors considering taking a sabbatical?

Do it! I realized after the fact that my passion for ministry was diminishing. I served a parish in Southern Oregon for 16 years, and realized most of the goals we had set were pretty well completed (e.g., worship alternatives, developing a school) and I just needed some time to be renewed. Had my first congregation provided for sabbaticals, I might not have taken the call to Portland. The sad news - I didn't realize I was burning out.



Case Study from an Anonymous Pastor

"... I honestly needed 6 weeks to 'watch paint dry' and not be burdened by the needs of a congregation in hospice care...."

Sabbatical requests aren't always met with positive responses. Sometimes, even when pastors bring up the subject of a sabbatical or "consistent sabbath-taking" in conversation, they are challenged and/or discouraged. The following is an actual example of one pastor's experience, shared with his permission. He reached out to us when we were building the toolkit and asked to share his story. Names and other confidential information are removed. This anonymous case study, in its own way, may demonstrate the importance of a shared understanding of the WHY behind a sabbatical. Sabbatical is not a vacation from congregational duties; it is part of a plan to strengthen the leader, build resilience, and help the leader lean into healthy rhythms that sustain long-term ministry.

"With seven years of service under my belt with (my former congregation), I approached my circuit visitor to help me present the idea to my leadership for my congregation to give me a focused time of rest. I was honest with him about needing a few months to rest and recover after a long service with a church in decline where it felt like nothing was working. My circuit visitor refused. He told me I would have to enroll in some kind of direct continuing education or go on a mission trip, and that he wouldn't support any other kind of sabbatical. I honestly needed 6 weeks to 'watch paint dry' and not be burdened by the needs of a congregation in hospice care. I was too burnt out to consider that my district staff might think differently and have helpful resources, to find a colleague to support me, to ask for clarification from my circuit visitor, or push against the hard line that I perceived he had taken. I gave up on the idea of rest and returned to ministry work."

"(Like many pastors facing burnout) I took a new call to a new situation a few years later. I hoped the new situation would alleviate some of the weariness. But it did not. It simply didn't address my need for rest or reflection. Furthermore, I had only eight days of 'free time' between the two calls, which I used for prep my home for sale and to visit dying members in the hospital. I could not let them die alone. Once I started the new call, I began the monumental task of learning a new congregation with a new power structure, new leaders, and new expectations. It was new – but not refreshing."

"I'm not alone in this experience. Many of my seminary classmates have had older, workaholic circuit visitors or district presidents deny them advocacy with their congregations for rest. Most of them put their heads back down, grinded it out, and tried to be faithful. Some left the ministry in defeat or as a result of a moral failure. I'm honestly less interested in making sure people go into a sabbatical or come out of a sabbatical as I am focused on whether we're going to be honest about our policy. If we're not going to let guys get the rest that they personally need, then let's not bring up the idea of sabbatical. If we're going to say we have a policy but offer little help to get there, then let's not bring up the idea of sabbatical. The first step feels like the hardest. Bringing it up. Having a good conversation with a mentor who will advocate for me. Maybe it would be a good idea for circuit visitors to make this part of our regular conversation, so it gets normalized instead of sidelined."

A note on the impact of the pandemic: "Coming out of COVID, few of us are doing well. Many of us ramped up our workload trying to move things online or do 'outside worship.' The weight of leading our church bureaucracies through the pandemic got to us too. I'm not taking shots at anyone on this -- it was an emergency. But lots of guys got eaten up by internal conflict or sheer workload burnout. To this end, it may be helpful to 'encourage rest' sooner upon us, prior to any supposed 7-year cycle. Some guys may not make it to their seventh year given the challenges we've been through."





APPENDIX 2 – MINISTER CHECKLIST

The following checklist mirrors APPENDIX 3 Ministry Leadership Checklist, but includes further items for the consideration of the minister. This is not an exhaustive checklist but is provided as a starting point. Please make this checklist your own, including whatever else you deem necessary. We encourage you to think of this entire process like planning for a trip – with the assumption that first, you are creating your personalized “map” for the sabbatical “trip.” Then you will set out on the journey using the map. You’ll need to identify your why, what, how, and where. (The “who” may include any number of supportive leaders, plus family members and friends.)

- **BEGIN** — Begin your plan with prayer, the Word, study, conversation, assessments, and self-discovery. What do you need? What do you want? These are critical questions to the entire process. It is worth giving yourself the space and time to adequately explore this question: “What do I really want?”
 - o Prayer – Ask God to guide you in this new journey. Consider setting time aside for a two-day retreat to consider your capacity, level of energy, and what you need.
 - o Word – What does God show in His word regarding sabbath and sabbath rest?
 - o Study – Use the case studies, contacts, and resources provided in the appendices as a point of departure for discovery and planning.
 - o Conversation – Meet with your spouse, close friends, and mentors. Consider using the services of a skilled coach who will help you draw out where you are and where you want to go (district coaching resources are listed in the primary document and appendices).
 - I. Invite at least one trusted advisor into this area of your life. We recommend two: a mentor and a coach. A mentor is someone you’ve identified who “does the rhythm of sabbath well” and can pour this practice and learning into you. It may be another ministry leader in your area, but a mentor can also be further away. All it takes is an openness on your part to meet consistently (in person, on the phone, or over Zoom) to receive wisdom that the mentor is willing to share. A coach is someone skilled at asking you powerful questions and drawing out where you are and where you want to go. Both are important, but for different reasons.

- o Assessments – There are a number of assessments that can be helpful in taking a snapshot of where you are as a leader. Consider using the online 10-minute annual [“Leadership Self-Assessment”](#) provided by the NOW District. The process of answering the questions in itself can be helpful to getting yourself moving towards a “sabbatical mindset.”
 - o Self-Discovery – What is it about this time right now that requires a sabbatical? What within me needs rejuvenating? How might I best grow in appreciating a sabbath rest in Christ?
- **ATTEND TO REGULAR REST** — Don’t forget this! What does my regular non-sabbatical rest look like?
 - o If you have not already done so in your practice, set a plan to begin to implement a basic rhythm of ceasing and resting into your life beginning with your next month. It may be that during these shorter periods of rest you will be able to dig more deeply into what you want for extended sabbatical.
 - o Set a time to review how it went.
 - o Use the new learning from this practice to set a second set of goals that includes a larger practice of sabbatical in your life.
 - o In other words: This is a practice (not a mental theory alone) that requires planning and effort to implement it into our lives. May the Lord bless your attention to this!
- **CREATE A SABBATICAL WORKGROUP** — Create a Sabbatical Workgroup with your key leaders (with minister as advisory and full participant). The purpose is to identify a plan for minister sabbatical, policy (if there is none), and to regularly implement the plan.
- **DEFINE THE PURPOSE AND LENGTH OF THE SABBATICAL** — Determine the reason for the sabbatical, such as to pursue further education, recover from burnout, or travel (or a combination of these and others). How far in advance must it be requested? Decide on the length of the sabbatical, usually ranging from three months to nine or 12 months.
- **DETERMINE ELIGIBILITY AND FREQUENCY** — Determine with your leaders if you are currently eligible for a sabbatical and how often you may take it. Eligibility may depend on length of service or job responsibilities. Frequency may depend on your budget or staffing needs. Also consider what time of year a sabbatical will and will not be taken (Advent, Lent, school holidays, etc.)
- **SET EXPECTATIONS** — Define what your leaders expect from you before, during, and after the sabbatical. As recommended earlier in this toolkit, the minister should be developing a plan in conversation with leadership. This includes a plan for covering your responsibilities and a re-entry plan (may include a presentation on “key learnings,” and leadership conversations as a result).
- **COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS** — We recommend that this remains at least status quo for the minister, without sudden or negative changes (P.T.O., benefits, healthcare, etc.).
- **PLAN FOR COVERAGE** — Develop a plan for covering your responsibilities while you are on sabbatical. This may involve hiring temporary staff (i.e., part-time principal, pulpit supply, administrative support, visitation, bible study leadership, etc.), working with leaders in your local



circuit and school, redistributing responsibilities among existing staff members, or forming committees to help with the additional workload. See the President's Office and Education Office in your district for info on pulpit supply and education/administration, and other supports.

- **INVOLVE THE CONGREGATION AND/OR SCHOOL** — Find ways to make the sabbatical a congregation or school-wide effort. It is important that members, staff, and/or parents are on board as part of the process. Examples include forming sabbatical committees, prayer teams, encouragement teams, etc. to help facilitate congregation or school needs and offer support. With your leaders, create a plan for what these groups might look like.
- **REVIEW AND REVISE** — Regularly review and revise the sabbatical policy to ensure it is meeting the needs of staff and congregation and school. It bears reminding that people don't serve policies, it is the policies that are created (and revised appropriately) to serve people. Building in a regular review process is essential to keeping policies in line with ministry needs. Solicit feedback from those who have taken a sabbatical, your congregation members, school leaders, etc., and adjust as necessary.
- **GO ON SABBATICAL!**
- **RE-ENTRY**
 - o What is your plan to deal with the very normal re-entry anxiety in yourself and those you serve?
 - o Keep an attitude of celebration at the forefront: Everyone has changed – we're here to celebrate what God has done in our lives while apart.
 - o Set specific meetings with your leaders with an agenda to revisit everyone's goals and expectations as a part of the re-entry process.
 - o Submit a report to the congregation/school of your key learnings from your time away.
 - I. We recommend you separate sharing what you learned while on sabbatical from what you will do about it/plans for what is next.
 - II. This is a time for celebrating each party and the changes everyone has gone through: for debriefing and reconnecting, for learning from one another, for sharing "highs" and "lows" from your time apart.





APPENDIX 3 – MINISTRY LEADERSHIP CHECKLIST (CONGREGATIONS, SCHOOLS, ETC.)

To the Leaders of Our Congregations, Schools, and Ministries:

Thank you for taking the time to consider providing your minister with a sabbatical. We hope that you have been able to review the full packet in this toolkit. We also hope that the practice of sabbath rest is built into your own life.

Though this toolkit is focused primarily on assisting the full-time called minister (ordained and commissioned) employed 12-months out of the year, we believe that scripture is clear in outlining that every follower of Christ has a regular practice of rest and renewal. We hope this toolkit is energizing to you personally as you work through a sabbatical plan with your minister. Our expectation is that your minister will be more healthy and more focused on the work upon return.

Certainly, having a sabbatical policy is an important structure to assist in caring for your minister. But even more important is the encouraging attitudes that ministry leaders like you can model in conversations and meetings. Our hope is that the conversations initiated around “sabbatical” will be a blessing to your common ministry together, and to the caring bond you have with your full-time ministers.

We are here to support you in this work. Please reach out to your district office if you have any questions or require additional assistance.

Helping You Do Your Best Work Together,

Your District Staff

California-Nevada-Hawaii, Northwest, Pacific Southwest



Helping Our Ministers Do Their Best Work

How does a full-time minister of the Gospel do their best work? There are many components when it comes to attitudes, skills, and behaviors. Included is the sometimes-overlooked practice of regular rest and renewal. Out here in the West, we know what it means to deal with long, dry periods. We understand drought. Like a weary land in need of refreshment, the minister requires time to soak in the grace of God and cease from activity for a time. How, indeed, can anyone pour from an empty container or reservoir? Sabbatical is an intentional plan for the minister to address “keeping the reservoir filled.”

Some Critical Considerations

The congregation/school may want to appoint a Sabbatical Committee (three to five members, which may include the president, an elder, and a school board representative if the person taking sabbatical is in the school) to assist both the professional worker and congregation/school in planning the sabbatical.

- It is an expectation in the NOW District, the PSD District, and the CNH District that our ministers practice sabbath rest regularly and plan with their ministry leaders for longer-term sabbaticals.
- Recognize that it may take conversation and education together to understand the value of the sabbatical. Don't rush this. Work together to identify a clear plan that is a fit for all parties. This includes appropriate information to all members/constituents on the “why” for regular sabbath rest (see APPENDIX 5 and APPENDIX 6 for a variety of resources for congregation reading, bible study, and discussion).
- Building “worker care” conversations as a regular agenda item into meetings can be helpful.
- We recommend that one outcome of a sabbatical working group should be a long-term committee/task force (if you do not already have one) responsible for regular attention to minister care. This includes topics such as salary/benefits, vacation time, leadership development, continuing education, family support, encouragement, etc.
- Clarify sabbatical benefits to the full-time minister.
- What is the congregation and/or school's plan for pastoral care, public worship, administration, supervision, and other leadership requirements during sabbatical?
- What is the school's plan to replace the professional worker during his/her absence?
- What responsibilities need to continue and how will they be taken care of?
- Are there any expectations for the professional worker following the sabbatical? (e.g., must remain on staff for at least one year following sabbatical.) The sabbatical is not a time for a worker to pursue another call or employment elsewhere. However, if during the sabbatical a worker prayerfully discerns that this call or professional ministry is not their calling, then the matter needs to be addressed in a forthright and God-pleasing manner.
- What if multiple staff members desire a sabbatical at the same time or in overlapping times?
- What length of sabbatical is appropriate for the minister's needs?

The Importance of A Sabbatical Policy

Sabbatical policies are an important aspect of ensuring the well-being of ministry leaders. A sabbatical can provide staff members with the opportunity to take a break from their regular duties, recharge, and return to their work refreshed and renewed. We highly recommend congregations and schools include a sabbatical policy for the care of their full-time, 12-month employed workers. See APPENDIX 5 for examples.



The Checklist

- **Create a Sabbatical Workgroup (with minister as advisory and full participant).** The purpose is to identify a plan for minister sabbatical, policy (if there is none), and to regularly implement the plan. See also bullet four on the previous page Re: a minister care committee.
- **Define the Purpose and Length of the Sabbatical** — Determine the reason for the sabbatical, such as to pursue further education, recover from burnout, or travel (or a combination of these). How far in advance must it be requested? Decide on the length of time, usually ranging from three months to nine or 12 months.
- **Determine Eligibility and Frequency** — Determine who is eligible for a sabbatical and how often they can take it. Eligibility may depend on length of service or job responsibilities. Frequency may depend on your budget or staffing needs. Also consider what time of year a sabbatical will and will not be taken (Advent, Lent, school holidays, etc.)
- **Set Expectations** — Define what is expected of the staff member before, during, and after the sabbatical. As recommended earlier in this toolkit, the minister should be developing a plan in conversation with leadership. This includes a plan for covering their responsibilities and a re-entry plan (may include a presentation on “key learnings,” and leadership conversations as a result).
- **Compensation and Benefits** — We recommend that this remains at least status quo for the minister, without sudden or negative changes (P.T.O., benefits, healthcare, etc.).
- **Plan for Coverage** — Develop a plan for covering the staff member's responsibilities while they are on sabbatical. This may involve hiring temporary staff (administrative and supervisory coverage, pulpit supply, visitation, bible study leadership, etc.), working with leaders in your local circuit and school, redistributing responsibilities among existing staff members, or forming committees to help with the additional workload. See the President’s Office and Education Office in your district for info on pulpit supply, administrative options, coaching, and other supports.
- **Involve the Congregation and/or School** — Find ways to make the sabbatical a congregation and school-wide effort. It is important that members, staff, and families are on board as part of the process. Examples include forming sabbatical committees, prayer teams, encouragement teams, etc. to help facilitate congregational needs and offer support for the worker. Create a plan for what these groups might look like.
- **Review and Revise** — Regularly review and revise the sabbatical policy to ensure it is meeting the needs of staff, congregation, and school. It bears reminding that people don’t serve policies; it is the policies that are created (and revised appropriately) to serve people. Building in a regular review process is essential to keeping policies in line with ministry needs. Solicit feedback from those who have taken a sabbatical, your congregation members, school leaders, etc., and adjust as necessary.

A final thought: *By providing opportunities for renewal, rest, wellness, and development, a sabbatical can help ministry leaders stay healthy and fully committed to the work you have called them to do. Sabbaticals are not mandatory. But they **are** essential. What does this mean? A ministry may endure a long time without its workers taking regular rest, but it cannot do its best work. The focus of this toolkit is to help ministries (and the lay leaders responsible) and ministers work together to determine the best way to keep full-time ministers thriving rather than just surviving. On behalf of all three West Coast districts (and your brothers and sisters in Christ in our shared ministries across all our communities and regions), we thank you for making this a priority. We believe that you will not be disappointed by giving regular attention to robust care for your ministers.*



APPENDIX 4 – SABBATICAL POLICY EXAMPLES

CONGREGATION EXAMPLE 1

Sabbatical Policy for Called Workers

Adopted _____

(This sabbatical policy will complement the continuing education policy for each called worker.)

What is a sabbatical?

From the beginning of creation, God has established times for us to cease our striving and set aside our work in order to renew, recreate, and re-center our lives. These moments, whether they be a night of rest, a day of worship each week, or a year of fallow every seven years (Leviticus 25:4), can be called sabbaticals. Sabbatical times remind us that life must be renewed in order to be effective. Sabbatical times provide opportunities to reinvigorate and revitalize life. The keeping of sabbath rest times is so important that it is incorporated into the 10 commandments (Exodus 20:8-10). Sabbath and sabbatical are essential to healthy faithful living. In our fast paced and hectic world the church can model a respect for the need for renewal.

Three primary goals are to be served by this sabbatical policy:

- *Renewal.* The sabbatical is a time to step back from the continuous responsibilities of church work, to renew and replenish the reservoirs of creativity and spirituality, and to seek refreshment and renewal through a change of environment and respite from routine.
- *Reflection.* The period of renewal will gradually open into a period of reflection. This may take such forms as study, further training, continuing education, spiritual renewal, a review of accomplishments and challenges faced, or entering into a relationship with a mentor.
- *Recommitment.* It is expected that the sabbatical will lead to a recommitment to ministry in the church, perhaps with a new focus or new direction born of reflection, and with new energy.

How does a sabbatical benefit the worker?

The day-to-day requirements of ministry make it very difficult if not impossible to find time for in-depth study and reflection.

A sabbatical provides...

- A time of rest, renewal, and enrichment.
- A time to deepen his/her relationship with the Lord.
- A time to pursue a particular area of interest.

- A time to reflect upon and evaluate personal ministry strengths and style.

How would a sabbatical benefit the congregation?

- In the case of a pastoral sabbatical the congregation would benefit by hearing a different pastor with different insights sharing God's Word.
- Congregation would get more involved in the daily ministry of the congregation.
- Congregation would benefit from the worker's new experiences and knowledge upon returning from sabbatical.

How will the pastoral needs of the congregation be met?

- A contract will be extended to a pastor or pastors to preach and lead Sunday worship, teach one Sunday class, make shut-in and hospital calls, handle any funerals and weddings, attend elders and church council meetings (when available), and be available one day in the office each week for appointments.

Requirements - Before the sabbatical begins

- 1) The called worker shall have served the congregation for six years before being eligible for sabbatical leave.
- 2) The request for leave shall include the purpose and expected length of the sabbatical.
- 3) The request for leave shall be made to the Board of Elders or other overseeing board by October 1 of the year prior to the sabbatical for budget and planning purposes.
- 4) If more than one called worker is serving the congregation, only one sabbatical leave shall be granted per year.
- 5) The worker taking a sabbatical shall work with the congregation in seeing that his/her responsibilities are adequately taken care of during the sabbatical.
- 6) Approval for the sabbatical shall come from the Voters Assembly.

Requirements - During the Sabbatical

- 1) The length of the sabbatical is generally not to exceed three months, but may be longer depending on need and worker request.
- 2) The church worker's vacation time, salary, housing and benefits, excluding car allowance, shall be continued.
- 3) The called worker is to take a complete break from the congregation.
- 4) Continuing education monies may be used to help cover the costs of travel, books, tuition etc. of the sabbatical.

Requirements - After the Sabbatical

- 1) The called worker shall provide a report and evaluation on the impact of the sabbatical to the congregation and the overseeing board within 30 days from the end of the sabbatical.
- 2) The called worker is to remain normally at the congregation for at least one year following the sabbatical.
- 3) A period of six years shall elapse before another sabbatical can be granted.

CONGREGATION EXAMPLE 2

Sabbatical Leave: Called workers (pastors, DCEs, etc.) need to recreate and restore what has been worn down by day-to-day ministry. Sabbatical is a time to rest, receive, be nurtured, and reflect on their relationship with God so that the worker can be renewed, refreshed, and revitalized by the breath of God.

-- Normally a sabbatical will be for a period of three successive months every seven years after seven years of service at POP. No sabbatical leave will be taken during Lent or Advent.

-- A continuation of full salary and benefits will continue during the sabbatical period.

-- Pastor and DCE cannot take a sabbatical at the same time.



CONGREGATION EXAMPLE 3

The word "sabbatical" is derived from "Sabbath." Sabbath time is based on Genesis 2:1-4a account of creation in which God modeled it and later commanded the setting aside of 1/7th of our time for worship and restoration in Exodus 17:8-11. For ancient Israel, Sabbath-keeping was a spiritual discipline that was designed to develop the Israelites' ability to trust God. New Testament example includes Luke 5:16... Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

Purpose: To enhance the personal ministry of the pastor through structured time away, so they may gain purpose, meaning, vision, and joy in their ministry to further the ministry objectives here.

Description: A sabbatical (ministry renewal leave) is an intentionally structured time away to relax, focus, and allow themselves to be recharged through the Holy Spirit. Elements should include: time to strengthen relationships with family and friends, time of relaxation, time to pursue personal interest, and time of renewal around things that benefit the congregation's mission.

Benefits:

- The mission of the congregation benefits from their pastor's new experiences and abilities, as well as him being refreshed and renewed.
- The pastor benefits from the personal and spiritual growth and renewal that comes from participating in an intentionally structured time away.

Length of time: up to three months not to take place during Advent nor Lent

Eligibility: Called staff serving at St. Lukes after their seventh year and every seven years thereafter.

Expectations:

- The pastor won't seek nor entertain a new call for one year following their return.
- The pastor is not allowed to be employed by any other organization during his sabbatical.
- Receiving of grants for education during this time is acceptable.

Financials:

- Both the congregation and the pastor contribute 3% of salary and housing to a sabbatical fund.
- The pastor's portion is to be returned to him in the event he leaves.
- Pastor receives normal compensation less car allowance and expenses from this fund during sabbatical.

Internal Procedures:

- Must be requested 12 months in advance.
- Must not overlap during Lent, Easter, Advent, or Christmas.
- A small team is to be formed to ensure every aspect is covered.
- Must have written proposal including desired outcomes (What does the pastor dream/hope to happen personally through this time?), description of activities, summary of travel, and detailed list of tasks and responsibilities to be attended to in his absence (How will ministry continue in his absence?).
- The staff is to keep a weekly log of events in his absence.
- Re-entry plan is to be developed for his return.
- Reporting: Upon his return, the pastor will make a written or oral report to the ELT and congregation recapping how the time was spent and what was learned

For additional reading, download this full summary of the sabbatical process from a NOW District congregation:

[IMMANUEL'S SABBATICAL PROCESS.](#)





APPENDIX 5 – SABBATICAL READING AND PODCAST LIST (with links to Amazon or other sites)

This is a non-exhaustive reading list provided by the Center for Prayer and Renewal at the NOW District, by West Coast district staff (CNH, NOW, and PSD), and by ministers who have been on sabbatical. Future iterations of this annually-revised toolkit will include expanded resources and links. If we're missing an essential book or podcast, let us know!

Books:

[*Sacred Pathways, Gary Thomas*](#)

[*Boundaries, Henry Cloud*](#)

[*Reclaiming the Joy of Ministry, Grace Place Wellness*](#)

[*Celebration of Discipline, Richard Foster*](#)

[*The 4 Disciplines of Execution, McChesney, Covey, and Huling*](#)

[*Chasing Francis, Ian Morgan Cron*](#)

[*The Pastor, Eugene Peterson*](#)

[*Five Smooth Stones, Eugene Peterson*](#)

[*Prayer, Philip Yancey*](#)

[*Affirmed: Building the Positive Mental Health of Your Pastor, Dr. Kirk Triplett*](#)

[*Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest: From Sabbath to Sabbatical and Back Again, Ruth Haley Barton*](#)

[*Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight, Norman Wirzba*](#)

[*Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now, Walter Brueggemann*](#)

[*An Uncommon Guide to Retirement: Finding God's Purpose for the Next Season of Life, Jeff Haanen \(specifically Chapter 2: "Sabbath"\)*](#)

[*Clergy Renewal: Alban Guide To Sabbatical, Richard Bullock*](#)

[*Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest, Ruth Haley Barton*](#)

[*Journeying Toward Renewal: A Spiritual Companion for Pastoral Sabbaticals, Melissa Sevier*](#)

[*Planning Sabbaticals: A Guide for Congregations and Their Pastors, Robert Saler*](#)

Podcasts:

Celebration of Discipline, The Series

<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL9cJRI8EYnLekhyWWJ6EVbt1bDCbjB8Pa>

The Faith and Work Podcast: "Sabbath Rest with Tara Owens"

<https://www.denverinstitute.org/s2e9-sabbath-rest-tara-owens/>

Bible Project Podcast: "Seventh-Day Rest -Sabbath Series"

<https://bibleproject.com/podcast/series/7th-day-rest-sabbath/>

Pastor Positive Mental Health (Rev. Dr. Kirk Triplett, LCMS Pastor and Counselor)

<https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/dr-kirk-triplett>

Making It Work Podcast: "Get the Rest You Need"

<https://depreo.org/making-it-work-episode-23/>





APPENDIX 6 – SABBATICAL RESOURCES AND ESSENTIAL LINKS

[Church Worker Wellness in the LCMS: https://www.lcms.org/how-we-serve/mercy/church-worker-wellness](https://www.lcms.org/how-we-serve/mercy/church-worker-wellness)

The “one-stop spot” for all things focused on worker wellness in the LCMS. A great beginning point for engaging the sabbatical journey.

[Consultation to Clergy \(NOW District\) — Rev. Laurin Gregory Vance: prlgvance@gmail.com](mailto:prlgvance@gmail.com)

A partner of the NOW District, Consultation to Clergy helps guide congregations through the sabbatical process. CTC’s Executive Director, Rev. Laurin Gregory Vance, is able to facilitate conversations with congregations as they consider the plausibility of a sabbatical.

[NOW District Coaching: https://calendly.com/dustkunkel/nowdistrictcoaching](https://calendly.com/dustkunkel/nowdistrictcoaching)

The NOW District is committed to delivering top-tier coaching as a primary investment to help leaders do their best work. Leadership Coaching for pastors and DCEs is offered through the President's Office by Dust Kunkel, Director of Ministry Leadership. He is a Certified Leadership Coach by Coachnet Global (coachnet.org) and Associate Certified Coach (ACC) by International Coach Federation (coachingfederation.org). You can contact him at dustk@nowlcms.org or 503-502-5600 (mobile) and 503-288-8383 (work). **[NOW District coaching for educators and administrators is offered by Director of Education Services, Jim Scriven: jims@nowlcms.org](#)** or 503-288-8383.

[West Coast Coaching: PSD \(psd-lcms.org\), CNH \(cnh-lcms.org\)](http://psd-lcms.org)

PSD District and CNH District — along with NOW District — are part of the joint West Coast collaboration. Each one offers its own unique coaching options. Please contact the specific District Office for more information. CNH: 925-245-4000 and PSD: 949-854-3232.

[NOW District Wellness Wheel: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdObX9hlfRdvioRQsnDEKrpz2Zwf9i45YAf5lxisPmNW5dlAw/viewform](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdObX9hlfRdvioRQsnDEKrpz2Zwf9i45YAf5lxisPmNW5dlAw/viewform)

The NOW District Annual Wellness Wheel is a free resource designed to encourage self-reflection and personal goal-setting. It is available to all leaders such as rostered workers, lay workers, and volunteers.

<https://lillyendowment.org/for-grantseekers/renewal-programs/pastors/>

Lilly Endowment Inc. funds many philanthropic efforts, including grants that support sabbaticals and renewal programs specifically tailored for pastors. These grants aim to provide individuals in various fields with opportunities for rejuvenation, reflection, and professional development – ultimately enhancing their contributions to society.

<https://www.soulshpherd.org/sabbatical-guide-pastors/>

"A Sabbatical Guide for Pastors" by Soul Shepherding equips pastors with practical insights, strategies, and resources to plan and embark on a meaningful sabbatical experience. It offers a comprehensive look at some questions and challenges pastors might face.

<https://faithandleadership.com/robert-saler-why-dont-i-get-vacation-too-how-talk-about-clergy-sabbaticals>

This article explores the question of why clergy members often struggle to receive vacation time. Read on for insights and guidance on how to approach conversations, encourage constructive dialogue, and advocate for the importance of sabbaticals as a means to support wellness and long-term ministry effectiveness.

<https://alban.org/2021/01/11/helping-your-congregation-understand-why-you-need-a-sabbatical/>

Alban Institute offers info to help congregations understand the necessity of sabbaticals. This article provides practical advice and strategies for pastors to effectively communicate the purpose and benefits of sabbaticals, fostering understanding, gain support, and igniting collaboration within the congregation to help ensure the overall goals are met.

<https://alban.org/archive/the-need-for-clergy-renewal/>

Alban Institute explores the importance of clergy renewal – emphasizing the need for clergy members to engage in intentional periods of rest and highlighting the benefits of sabbaticals to help prevent burnout.

<https://ministrysabbaticalresources.com/>

Ministry Sabbatical Resources is a valuable resource hub for clergy members seeking guidance and support for their sabbaticals. It is utilized by many LCMS districts and ministries as a tool for their workers as they navigate the sabbatical journey. This website offers a wealth of practical tools, articles, and information to help pastors prepare for and maximize the benefits of their renewal experiences.

<https://lillyendowment.org/stories/lilly-endowment-clergy-renewal-programs-what-will-make-your-heart-sing/>

This article showcases the Lilly Endowment's Clergy Renewal Programs and highlights the transformative experiences of past grant recipients. These stories emphasize the importance of clergy sabbaticals in fostering renewal, personal growth, and rediscovering joy in ministry.



<https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-quitting-ministry/>
<https://www.barna.com/research/spiritual-formation-back-seat/>
<https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-well-being/>

These three articles from Barna Group provide incredible insights and real data on the reasons pastors leave their positions. They shed light on the challenges and pressures faced by clergy members, with the aim of understanding WHY they leave – and some of the potential solutions to remedy this trend. With a mission to provide insights and resources for leaders, Barna conducts extensive research projects, surveys, and studies to inform discussions and drive meaningful conversations. NOTE: You may remember Barna CEO David Kinnaman was our keynote speaker at the 2022 NOW District Convention.

<https://pastorsoul.com/2019/02/08/how-to-structure-a-sabbatical-for-your-pastor/>

This resource offers guidance on structuring a sabbatical for pastors. It provides practical tips and insights on creating a well-organized sabbatical plan, including considerations for duration, goals, and strategies to ensure a fruitful and rejuvenating experience for the pastor and congregation.

<https://ministrypass.com/pastor-sabbatical/>

This article is a great resource for pastors considering or planning a sabbatical. It provides additional perspective and insight on the many ways to implement your sabbatical experience.

www.missiontrainingcenter.com

Mission Training Center is a robust lay leadership training platform that helps develop women and men for mission. It would be helpful for pastors who are seeking a sabbatical to have a "bench" of lay leaders fully trained to help carry the load during that time. MTC can do just that. NOTE: MTC is supported by the West Coast LCMS Districts (CNH, NOW, PSD) in partnership with Concordia University Irvine. The courses are all online, with emerging asynchronous access, so people can join from anywhere, at any time, in the world.

<https://plileadership.org/why-you-need-a-sabbatical/>
<https://plileadership.org/sabbatical-makes-a-difference/>

PLI is another ministry group that recognizes the importance of sabbaticals. These articles present compelling reasons why leaders need to step away for rest – emphasizing the benefits of rejuvenation, reflection, and renewal to cultivate long-term effectiveness. PLI encourages leaders to prioritize self-care and intentional breaks.

<https://weraise.org/what-we-do/grant-information/eligibility-information/>

We Raise Foundation offers grant programs that provide both a financial award and capacity building resources and support. Long-term successful programs and leaders benefit from expert advice, connections with other inspired leaders, and additional funding opportunities. We Raise actively connects grantees to activities and resources that will strengthen their programs, leadership, and effectiveness for sustainable impact.

<https://louisville-institute.org/programs-grants-and-fellowships/grants/pastoral-study-project/>

The Louisville Institute Pastoral Study Project Grant (PSP) awards grants of up to \$15,000 to support independent or collaborative study projects on Christian life, religious practices and institutions, and possibilities for the church, our communities, and the wider world. Grants are awarded to innovative clergy, lay leaders, and staff working in diverse Christian contexts in North America.

<https://divinity.duke.edu/events/study-leave-ministry-professionals>

Duke Divinity School offers a flexible Study Leave for Ministry Professionals program, allowing Christian institutional leaders, pastors, or laity to engage in self-directed study, worship, and prayer over five to seven days on the Duke University campus. Participants can select their study topic, receive resources for the week, and enjoy amenities like community activities, library access, accommodations, meals, and continuing education units. Tuition rates vary, with scholarship options available for eligible individuals.

NOW District CP&R (Center for Prayer & Renewal) — <https://nowlcms.org/category/resources/presidents-office/center-for-prayer-renewal-cpr/>

CP&R is the prayer ministry of the NOW District. Each year, members enjoy a prayer retreat at the Oregon Coast that consists of meditation, study, prayer-centered worship, fellowship, and spiritual development. First time attendees (Emmaus group) write their own brief spiritual autobiography, explore various styles of prayer, practice solitude, and learn about and practice Lectio Divina as a group. Returning attendees (Koinonia group) have more unstructured time for meditation and prayer. CP&R members also supply weekly prayers on the NOW District Facebook page.

DISTRICT AND SYNOD WEBSITES

NOW District LCMS: nowlcms.org

CNH District LCMS: cnh-lcms.org

PSD District LCMS: psd-lcms.org

Texas District LCMS: txlcms.org

Michigan District LCMS: michigandistrict.org

Florida-Georgia LCMS: fgadistrict.org

Southeastern District LCMS: se.lcms.org

Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod: www.lcms.org