

VBC PASTORAL SABBATICAL

OVERVIEW

The sabbatical is intended to provide pastoral staff who have served for an extended period at our church with a gift of time away from normal responsibilities and locations to pursue a plan of personal renewal, refreshment and growth. We believe this is a valuable investment in the lives of our pastoral staff and is a blessing we are grateful to make available. The sabbatical is not just a reward for longevity of service and commitment. More importantly, it is an opportunity for those who have given consistently of their teaching and life to refill their own hearts and resources in order that they might continue in effective service to the Lord.

We recognize the special benefit and wisdom of a Sabbath renewal. God's Sabbath principle, applied to their ministries, provides an opportunity to rededicate (sanctify) one's life and work to the Lord, reacquire God's perspective, and freshen one's spiritual health. In this way, the entire Body of Christ benefits and is blessed by the Sabbath. Additionally, we realize that the pastoral role carries with it a spiritual battle burden that is unique and warrants time away with God to recharge.

POLICY

In order to encourage a healthy ministry and longevity, the guiding elders encourage all pastoral staff to take a sabbatical leave during their fifth or seventh year of continuous service.

- Sabbatical Coach:

To get the most out of the sabbatical, we will partner the pastor with a sabbatical coach. The sabbatical coach will meet with the pastor and his spouse several times during the year. Approved sabbatical coaches are:

- David Larson @ Soul Shepherding <david@soulsherpherd.org>
- Alan Briggs @ Stay Forth Designs <alan@stayforth.com>
- Trey Finley @ eleven28

The sabbatical coach will be involved during three main periods:

1. Purpose & Plan: (6-8 months before the sabbatical)
 - The purpose of the sabbatical will be unique to the pastor who is taking it. Different factors in ministry and life will lead to different needs for the pastor and for his family.
 - The sabbatical coach will initially meet with the Executive Pastor to gain a big picture understanding of the pastor and his role. The coach will then meet two times with the pastor and his wife and may utilize additional assessment tools to help evaluate the health of the pastor, his family and his church. Together, the coach and Executive Pastor will help the pastor develop a purpose and plan for his sabbatical. The final proposal should have the affirmation of all four.
 - The plan should reflect the purposes stated in this document (spiritual, emotional, and physical rejuvenation) and should reflect a balance of physical rest, personal recreation, intellectual stimulation and spiritual renewal. Sufficient time for family should be included.
 - The plan should include plans for coverage of a pastor's responsibilities while they are on leave.
2. Mid-Sabbatical Check-In: The sabbatical coach and pastor will have a check-in half-way through.
3. Marriage Retreat: The sabbatical pastor and his wife will have a one-week marriage enrichment retreat – with the sabbatical coach or someone recommended by the coach
4. Post-Sabbatical Recap: The sabbatical coach and pastor will have a final check in two weeks after sabbatical completion. At this point, the sabbatical coach will work with the sabbatical pastor to create a sabbatical recap how the time was invested and what benefits were realized. This will also be shared by the Executive Pastor and made available to the guiding elders.

- Duration:
 1. Sabbaticals in the 5th year of service = 8 weeks
 2. Sabbaticals in the 7th year of service = 12 weeks

We recommend a sabbatical every five years. Despite its biblical significance, seven years between sabbaticals is likely too long. Three may feel too soon, though year three is often critical in the lifespan of a pastor on staff. Five is probably ideal for most churches.

The timing of the sabbatical leave for pastoral staff will be coordinated with the executive pastor. Care will be given to minimize overlapping Sabbatical leave between various pastoral staff at the same campus.

- Funding:
 1. Full salary and benefits will be provided during the Sabbatical leave.
 2. Additionally, the pastor may apply for additional funds for tuition, travel, etc., as these funds apply to the purpose of the sabbatical.
- The Sabbatical leave may not be taken as terminal leave (i.e. as leave at the end of employment).
- The understanding of a “sabbatical” is that the pastor is relieved from all routine and emergency duties during the time granted. The church leaders will handle routine and emergency matters.
- Regular church attendance and community is required during the sabbatical period, but attendance at VBC is not a requirement (and is not recommended unless attending other campuses).
- Commitment Of Continued Service: Staff will covenant with the church to serve at least two more years with the church after the sabbatical.
- Criteria for reviewing requests for sabbaticals will include performance, level of responsibility, type of position, and other relevant considerations.
- While not recommended, a pastor may decline a sabbatical leave. Such a request should come from both the pastor and his wife and be presented to the Executive Pastor.

WHAT A SABBATICAL IS NOT

- The sabbatical is not a vacation, at least in the traditional sense. The sabbatical should be considered leave from responsibilities for the purpose of renewal of the whole person.
- A sabbatical is not unstructured, unplanned and unaccountable time.
- It is not disciplinary action.

LEAVE OF ABSENCE vs SABBATICAL

There are times in a person’s life or ministry that crisis, health or circumstances demand time away to tend to those details. This is NOT what VBC would consider a sabbatical, but rather is a leave of absence. See our VBC Employee handbook, section 3.4 Family & Medical Leave. Staff in need of a leave of absence should discuss these needs with the Executive Pastor.

THE PURPOSE FOR SABBATICALS IN MINISTRY

No ministerial sabbatical is commanded in the Bible. Scriptures, nonetheless, uphold the sabbatical principle for renewal. Richard Bullock makes the observation that “over and over the stories of scripture point to the renewing power of ‘Sabbath time’. The Sabbath is more than an after thought of God’s action in creation. It’s a gift of rest from God, of renewal and hope”.¹

The purpose is to provide a time away from the ‘tyranny of the urgent’ for the leader to renew their spirit, gain perspective, renew vision for the future, and build organizational and leadership capacity for the vision and future challenges that the leader and organization will face. A sabbatical is an extended period of time for church leaders to rest, restore, revision, and refuel for the future.

REST

The first and perhaps most obvious principle is that of **rest**. This principle has existed from the very beginning. The roots of this principle are evident in Genesis at the conclusion of God’s work during Creation.

So the creation of the heavens and the earth and everything in them was completed. On the seventh day, having finished his task, God rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because it was the day when he rested from his work of creation. Genesis 2:1-3

After a prolonged period of ministry Jesus called his disciples to “come apart and rest”. Robert Randall commenting on this verse says: “Come apart and rest or simply come apart”.¹ Jesus proclaimed “the Sabbath was made for man” (Mk 2: 27-28)

Just as the sabbatical year was a biblically based provision to restore a farmer’s depleted field after six years of planting and harvesting, a sabbatical period for those in the ministry provides time for rest and renewal.²

RELEASE

It is also a time of **release**. It takes faith to let go and trust God. In a step of faith, the congregation releases the staff from normal shepherding responsibilities as well as the day-to-day work of the church, and the staff and congregation trust God to continue to be the Lord of his Church even in the pastor’s absence.

Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. If you do this, you will experience God’s peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:6-7

RENEWAL

The third, and arguably the second most obvious principle, is that of **renewal**. A powerful example of this principle is in 1 Kings 19, which outlines the aftermath of Elijah’s epic and triumphant confrontation with the forces of Baal on Mt. Carmel that resulted in Elijah fleeing out of fear for his life.

“Go out and stand before me on the mountain,” the LORD told him. And as Elijah stood there, the LORD passed by, and a mighty windstorm hit the mountain. It was such a terrible blast that the rocks were torn loose, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake there was a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire there was the sound of a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And a voice said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” 1 Kings 19:11-13

A sabbatical is first of all pro-active in that it is a preventative measure that in some forms it to be a part of ongoing

renewal and health for people in ministry. It appears the church and ministry today is very much involved in crisis management and one of the goals of leadership is to do all it can to not see these life crisis experiences result in personal and professional destruction.

A sabbatical is viewed as a nourishing pilgrimage, and provides an opportunity for sharpening of focus before a crisis situation develops. It does not guarantee that personal or ministry crisis will not happen, but that when it does, there is a strength and health that will help the staff deal with these issues more clearly and wisely.

The created world affords an example of the renewing process in the seasons of the year. Before new life can begin, the cycle of rest needs to be observed.

The pace of modern society and pressures of contemporary ministry can blind us to see the need for this rhythm of rest and renewal. Eugene Peterson explores this sense of rhythm in life:

“As we re-enter that sequence of days when God spoke energy and matter into existence, we repeatedly come upon the refrain ‘and there was evening and there was morning, one day... and there was evening and there was morning, a second day... and there was evening and there was morning’ on and on six times.

This is the Hebrew way of understanding day and not ours; evening and morning, one day. More than idiomatic speech is involved here. There is a sense of rhythm.

Day is the basic unit of God’s creative work; evening is the beginning of that day.

The Hebrew evening-morning sequence conditions us to the rhythms of grace. We go to sleep, and God begins his work. We wake and are called out to participate in God’s creative action.

Evening: God begins without our help. His creative day.

Morning: God calls us to enjoy and share and develop the works he initiated.”³

REFLECTION

The fourth principle, which is as equally as important as the first three, is that that of **reflection**. The importance of this principle is demonstrated in the Pauline Epistles. It was no accident that many, if not most, of Paul’s epistles to the churches he helped plant contained significant portions reflecting on his time there, the qualities they possessed, and his hopes and dreams for the respective churches. Out of that he was able to say

I don’t mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection! But I keep working toward that day when I will finally be all that Christ Jesus saved me for and wants me to be. No, dear brothers and sisters, I am still not all I should be, but I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven. Philippians 3:12-14

RESTORATION

There can be no denying the fact that one of the most pressing issues among pastors is that of “Burn-out”. It is an area that cannot be ignored. The pressures and expectations of ministry are intense and often destructive.

Congregations often hold unrealistic expectations relative to care, time, performance, visibility and availability ... Three of every four ministers endure a significant stress-related crisis at least once in their lives. Feeling helpless and cut off, many of them are overwhelmed by emotional overload ... many of them do, quietly and meekly, resign from their posts ... but most ministers continue to endure the hazards ... they continue because there is no option.⁴

Eugene Peterson has an answer for “busy” pastors. *“But if I vainly crowd my day with conspicuous activity or let others fill my day with imperious demands, I don’t have time to do my proper work, the work to which I have been called. How*

can I lead people into the quiet place beside the still waters if I am in perpetual motion? How can I persuade a person to live by faith and not by works if I have to juggle my schedule constantly to make everything fit into place?"⁵

There can be no denying the fact that excessive prolonged stress can reduce alertness, create errors in judgment, distort one's ability and capacity to cope with the complexity of ministry and interpersonal relationships. Often staff are left to struggle through with little or no help. This further creates anger, resentment and guilt. A sabbatical will not be the cure all to this issue; however, it can be met as a major step in the healing of burn-out.

REFOCUS

The last purpose of a sabbatical is **refocus**. The staff will be able to refocus their life and relationships with greater balance and intention. they will also have the opportunity to refocus their efforts in ministry and leadership of our congregation. During the sabbatical, Staff will be reading, studying and experiencing different aspects of ministry to become more effective in their ministry to us.

We preach Christ, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, that we may present Christian complete in Christ Jesus. To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily. Colossians 1:28- 29

LONGEVITY

Sabbaticals help foster longevity in calling. The lack of opportunity for personal renewal and stress relief has led many staff to "leave the ministry" to take up work in other job markets. The provision of a sabbatical may provide the means for staff to spend the necessary time renewing their calling and allowing them to continue in ministry.

¹ Randall, Robert. Time of Your Life. Victor Books 1986 1825 College Ave., Wheaton Ill 60187

² Peterson, Eugene. Desert & Harvest A Sabbatical Journey, Leadership Journal, Winter Quarter 1988, Vol. 1

³ Peterson, Eugene. God Gives to Us Even in Our Sleep Leadership Journal, Spring Quarter 1985, Vol. 2

⁴ Nelson, G. Edward. "Ministry May be Hazardous to your Pastor's Health." Resource. March/April 1994.

⁵ Peterson, Eugene. The Contemplative Staff: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction

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