

Some Principles and Practices for Sabbatical Leave

Becoming a Sabbath Community: A Guide for Churches

Some Principles and Practices for Sabbatical Leave

Compiled by Dr. Keith Farmer – July 2017

This brief paper is to augment two other short documents: "[Staying Passionate as a Ministry Leader](#)" and "[The Perfect Storm for emotional exhaustion through pastoral ministry](#)".

It gives particular attention to the potential role of 'sabbatical leave' as one strategy for helping when dilemmas such as emotional depletion (burnout) are impacting on ministry leaders.

From my mentoring of a wide range of ministry leaders (mainly pastors) over the last twelve-and-a-half years, it is evident that an – if not the most – important issue to tackle is the prevalence of burnout.

The draining nature of pastoral ministry (see "The Perfect Storm" document) means that the stewardship of emotional (and spiritual) resources is an important issue. Part of this stewardship is the biblical principle of sabbath rest (in particular, see Lev. 25:1-7). I believe this necessity for refreshment and recuperation of the Israeli land is an indication of a general order of creation: ongoing productivity requires regular recuperative rest. The most obvious example of this is our need for regular and sufficient sleep.

The Biblical rhythm seems to indicate that a one in seven proportion of rest to work is appropriate (see configuration in "Staying Passionate"). Having facilitated about 30 recent sabbaticals, I offer the following suggestion as to how a church or ministry might go about the (re) introduction of sabbatical in principle and practice.

1. Develop a policy with respect to sabbatical leave for pastors or other leaders which is written into the contract of employment.
2. Have this policy gradually implemented, beginning with the Senior Leader/s at a pace that allows for careful budgetary management. For people who have served prior to the introduction of this Policy, some retrospectivity may be considered.
3. Recognise that sabbatical leave is for the replenishment of any resources that have been significantly drained as a result of the ministry role, e.g. emotional, spiritual, physical, relational. Therefore, during the sabbatical the leader is released from all of their normal responsibilities, e.g. preaching.
4. There is an overlap between sabbatical and holidays (together they come to about a one in seven ratio of rest to work).
5. The components of Sabbatical Leave need to be carefully planned by the leader (maybe with help from a mentor or Elders / Board and approved by the Board.)

6. Usually the chairperson of the Elders / Board communicates to the church the principle and practicalities of the sabbatical.
7. Except in unusual circumstances there needs to be adequate preparation time so that all the tasks usually undertaken by the person taking Sabbatical are effectively covered. This may mean additional financial budgeting. Note that the pastor on sabbatical would normally receive their normal remuneration for the period of the sabbatical. I would also encourage that some additional financial help – e.g. for travel – be budgeted for.
8. Regularly chosen segments for sabbatical include spiritual retreating, reading, attendance at selected conferences, visiting other churches or ministries, writing or other creative pursuits.
9. The person taking sabbatical would make a brief report to the Elders / Board following their break.
10. I suggest that the accumulation of sabbatical leave normally be in the order of one to one-and-a-half weeks per year of service, to be taken no more frequently than after four years, and no less frequently than after seven years. This means that after seven years a leader could maybe take seven to 10 weeks of sabbatical leave.

I am very aware that there are significant issues to be addressed in what I am recommending, including how the ministry will fare when a significant leader is on sabbatical. Although my experience is still rather limited, I do not know of one ministry situation where the sabbatical period has led to significant (or any) decline. On several occasions other team members have stepped up in very encouraging and significant ways.