

Developing a Sabbatical Culture

Becoming a Sabbath Community: A Guide for Churches

Developing a Sabbatical Culture

10 suggestions from Keith Farmer's observations:

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.

An Observation from the Management of an Australian NGO at the Introduction of a Sabbatical Policy in their Organisation:

“Study has exposed the myth that an executive sabbatical will be a chaotic disruption, finding instead that the creative disruption of a well-planned sabbatical can be productive for the entire management and leadership of an organisation. Organisational capacity is increased as the next tier down of management takes on new responsibilities. Governance is strengthened as a result of the planning and learning that goes with a sabbatical process. Directors come back rejuvenated, with a fresh vision and innovative ideas, and tend to extend their tenure with the organisation.”

Barton, Ruth Haley. Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest (Transforming Resources) (p. 155). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

If you are a leader in a church community or a ministry organization, consider setting aside some time in your meeting schedule to reflect on establishing a pattern of sabbatical leave for pastors or senior leaders as part of your commitment to sabbath-keeping in community. Assign someone who has passion around this to lead the conversation about the ways in which God built this pattern into our world and what you believe about it now. Do you have anything like this already built into your life together? If so, describe what you already have in place in clear terms and revisit it—assess how you are doing with living out this value, reaffirm your commitment to it, and maybe even further develop it. Don't wait for your pastor and other significant leaders to burn out and then have to come to you to ask for a sabbatical as a way of averting crisis. Instead, get out ahead of it; determine which leadership roles should be eligible for sabbatical and at what intervals. Everyone wins when clergy are granted periodic chunks of renewal leave. Pastors remain vital and healthy while congregations receive the benefits of engaged, long-term pastorates, new lay ministry skills, and exciting opportunities for mission . . . this is a very progressive way lay leaders can ensure the best of clergy leadership over the long haul.

[When a Day Off Isn't Enough: Sabbatical Rest Sustains Pastoral Health for the Long-Haul](#) – Missio Alliance

Last year, I had one of the most transformative experiences of my life: Six months of doing nothing.

Perhaps it wasn't quite doing “nothing” – I am, after all, still a parent, along with other roles in my life that carry responsibilities. But after eight years of pastoral ministry, I asked my elder board for the longest Sabbatical available according to our church's policy. A six-month leave required a year of planning, multiple people to significantly increase their responsibilities and leadership in my absence, and an investment of my church's finances. Was a season of rest for me worth so much trouble?

Yes!

Prioritizing the Well-Being of Pastors is Necessary for the Church's Mission

Anecdotally, I have met many lead pastors who have been in full-time ministry for more than 20–30 years yet have never been granted a Sabbatical. “It’s never been a good time” is often the phrase offered as an explanation. If you are a pastor who has never had a Sabbatical, or if you are part of a church that does not have a Sabbatical policy, now may not be a convenient time to ask for one, but it is definitely the right time to move in that direction.

Yet according to a recent survey conducted by Vanderbloemen,² 72.29% of churches do not offer a Sabbatical program for their pastors. Of those that did offer a Sabbatical program, fewer than 30% of those churches granted a Sabbatical of more than 8 weeks. This means the vast majority of churches that do offer Sabbaticals envision a scant 1–7 week period of rest for their pastors.

Pastoral burnout doesn’t just happen because pastors are taking too much on themselves or because churches expect too much from them. Even in healthy churches, the work of pastoring is HARD. Full stop.

5 Ways Prolonged Seasons of Rest Make Pastors Stronger

1. Strength to Resist Idolatry
2. Strength to Resist Anxiety
3. Strength to Resist Other People’s Expectations
4. Strength to Resist the Drive to be More Than We Are
5. Strength to Resist Exploiting Our Church and Our Neighbours

How to Prioritize Prolonged Seasons of Rest for Pastoral Ministry

Churches, if you don’t have one already, come up with a policy for Sabbaticals so your pastor doesn’t have to ask for one on her own initiative. Create a fund for your pastor to use on Sabbatical to pursue spaces for guided retreat, prayerful rest, and recreation. Laughter and fun are some of the most restorative activities for us as humans. Talk with your pastor about their need for a Sabbatical, and collaborate on the timing and planning of that season.

A Sabbatical policy is not a luxury, but a necessity in faithful mission.

The call to pastoral ministry is a beautiful privilege. And we need more Christ-formed, creative, and gentle people taking up the mantle of pastoring, not less! Yet this call asks a lot of us. If we want to make it plausible for more men and women to endure in this beautiful calling, we need to see that rhythms of Sabbatical rest – both short and prolonged – are necessary for our mission.

Click on the following link for the full article by Juliet Liu:

[When a Day Off Isn't Enough: Sabbatical Rest Sustains Pastoral Health for the Long-Haul](#)
– Missio Alliance