

John Knox Presbytery

A Sabbatical Renewal Leave Guideline

Rationale

The purpose of Sabbatical Renewal Leave is to strengthen and enhance ministry and mission. It is an extension of the Biblical concept of a Sabbath day and a Sabbath year for renewal. It is an act of faith, believing that God will provide renewal through a period of reflection and changed activity, serving as an occasion for recovery of vital energies, and offering a chance to disengage from a sense of “driveness” in ministry in order to promote the health, wellbeing, effectiveness and faithfulness of pastor and congregation. Sabbatical leave is qualitatively different from “time off” or “vacation” for the pastor in that there is a plan for personal and professional renewal and a strategy for disengaging from routine tasks so that ministry and mission may be viewed from a new perspective. The general goal of the sabbatical leave is to allow the pastor to return to responsibilities with renewed energy, spiritual vision, and effectiveness and to promote a stronger and revitalized relationship between pastor and congregation for the future.

Although on the face of it, the Sabbatical Renewal Leave may seem like yet another financial burden for the local congregation to bear, it is crucial for Session and congregation to recognize the long-term benefits that can come from granting Sabbaticals. When properly timed, prepared for, and attention given to re-entry, pastors and congregations can expect a longer and more effective partnership together in ministry. Sabbatical leave should not be used to excuse a lack of routine self-care leading to patterns of “burn out” nor happen in the midst of pre-existing unaddressed major tensions related to job performance of pastor or resentments of pastor regarding the congregation. These dynamics should be dealt with first and separately.

Sabbaticals can be creative and varied, ranging from academic pursuits to contemplative practices, reading plans to exploration through travel, retreats to projects, with attention to intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual benefits.

Sabbatical Renewal Leave is often considered by pastors who have served in their present position for at least six (6) continuous years and typically lasts a period of 3-4 months. It is appropriate for Teaching Elders, Commissioned Ruling Elders, and Church Educators to consider sabbatical leave. Pastors and sessions are encouraged to tailor sabbatical renewal leave based on the needs of pastor, staff, and congregation. The COM encourages congregations to develop their own policies concerning sabbatical renewal leave and to consider incorporating this into a pastor’s terms of call.

Planning

Planning should begin way in advance of the intended leave in order to allow for sufficient time to arrange for pulpit supply, pastoral care, and administrative continuity. It is often advisable for congregations to plan several years ahead, setting aside funds to build an escrow account to cover the financial costs of pastoral coverage during sabbatical leave. Grants may be available through the denomination and other funding sources, each with their own conditions and application requirements. Typically, the employing church will continue the pastor's salary and pension/major medical benefits at the same level as those in effect at the time of the Sabbatical Leave. The church will also be responsible for the cost of pastoral coverage during this time.

Plans for sabbatical leave should be thoroughly discussed and approved by pastor and session, with clearly stated purpose, goals/focus for both pastor and congregation, and desired outcomes. Taking the time to prepare the congregation and lay the foundation for a period of sabbatical leave can ensure better understanding and effectiveness in the long run.

Plans for the sabbatical renewal leave should be submitted to the COM for its approval. Any plan should include clear agreement about how annual vacation and continuing education time will intersect with sabbatical leave, how expenses will be reimbursed, plans for preparing the congregation and for re-entry, plans for coverage during a pastor's absence. The COM will counsel with the session regarding pastoral services for the church during the pastor's absence, offer support and prayer, and facilitate re-entry and follow-up.

Re-Entry

The re-entry process after sabbatical leave is as important as the effort made in planning for it. The pastor/educator should report details of their sabbatical leave and its value and benefits to the session, congregation, and COM. Such expected benefits may include:

- Renewed wellbeing of pastor
- Improved or re-tooled leadership skills for the future
- Discovery of the strength and gifts of lay leadership heretofore under-utilized
- New understandings of the concepts of mission
- Reaffirmation of calling to ministry on part of clergy and congregation with both being reinvigorated and rededicated to the work of God's people.

The ideal result would be for the congregation to see this period of time not just as the clergy's Sabbath Renewal Leave but also as the congregation's opportunity for renewal and revitalization, to the glory of God.