



# The Evangelical Congregational Church

## SABBATICAL/RENEWAL LEAVE GUIDELINES

### for Pastors of the Evangelical Congregational Church

#### A. Scriptural Background

The word *sabbatical* has its roots in the Biblical concept of the 'Sabbath' which means to rest or to cease work after seven days or years. Genesis 2:1-3 notes that God rested from his work of creation after seven days. The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8-11) describe the Sabbath as a day that you cease from work and rest. Leviticus 25 is subtitled 'The Sabbath Year'. Deuteronomy 15 describes a period after seven years in which release from several kinds of debt and labor are itemized. Jesus' forty days in the wilderness marked a turning point in his ministry. Moses' time tending sheep prepared him to hear God's call. Paul spent time in the desert of Arabia after his Damascus road experience preparing him for the work God was calling him to do.

#### B. Definition of a Sabbatical/Renewal Leave

Sabbatical Leave is a carefully planned period of time in which the Pastor is granted leave away from his normal responsibilities in order to spend an extended period of time in rest, renewal and refreshment. It is to be a time to receive spiritual nourishment, a change of perspective, to deepen the Pastor's relationship with God, himself and his family. It is to be a time of rest and cessation of his regular pastoral duties and activities.

A Sabbatical leave is a time for the Pastor to shift gears in order to rest, disengage, study, reflect or travel in order to return to the ministry renewed and refreshed in body, soul and mind. This is not a vacation, nor is it continuing education.

A Sabbatical/Renewal leave provides the Pastor an opportunity to reflect on his call to ministry, his relationship with God and with the church that he is shepherding. It is expected to benefit both the Pastor and the congregation.

#### C. Benefits for the Local Church

A well-planned Sabbatical can provide the opportunity for congregational growth and maturity. It will allow the members to use their spiritual gifts as they assume some of the responsibilities of their Pastor in his absence. It provides that local body of believers the opportunity to unite as a church as they give themselves in service to the church. Lay leaders will be able to fill the pulpit, visit the sick and shut-ins, and handle the administrative needs of the church.

The Pastor will return from his Sabbatical renewed, refreshed with a new vision and commitment for his church. To be an effective Pastor, he needs continual spiritual growth. With the hectic schedule of the day-to-day life of a Pastor, with the long hours that they work, often without a day off and almost never with two consecutive days off, there is very limited time on a normal pastoral schedule for spiritual growth, let alone rest or relaxation.

A Sabbatical allows the Pastor an extended leave before burnout, exhaustion, physical or emotional problems begin to take their toll on the Pastor. If a Pastor is dealing with any of these, it will affect his ministry and his church.

Because the Sabbatical is tied to service at one church over a period of time, Sabbaticals can encourage longer pastorates.

#### D. Eligibility, Length of time and Purpose

The National Conference of the Evangelical Congregational Church urges that all churches consider a Sabbatical/Renewal leave for their Pastor, regardless of their pastoral status within

The Evangelical Congregational Church, after the Pastor has served a minimum of 7 years at one church or charge and be reconsidered after each subsequent 7 year period of time at the same church or charge. (This means that a Pastor need not be ordained nor in the itinerancy to be eligible for a Sabbatical.)

The timing and length of the Sabbatical needs to be compatible with the church's present needs and programming. Each Official Board/Ministry Council will determine the specific dates and length of time for the Sabbatical after consultation and with approval of the Conference Minister and the Pastor.

The purpose of the leave: whether the Pastor takes the whole time for rest; whether the church wants some of the leave to be for study; or whether the church wants the Pastor to account for what he did during his leave will be based on the individual needs of the Pastor and the church. The purpose(s) of the Sabbatical will be determined in joint discussion with the Conference Minister, the Pastor and the Official Board/Ministry Council.

#### E. Procedure

1. The Lay Delegate should take the lead in suggesting a Sabbatical for his/her Pastor, although the regional Conference Minister, the Pastor and/or Official Board/Ministry Council may also present the idea. The request process and planning should begin no less than six months before the desired Sabbatical is to begin. Before any decisions are made, the Conference Minister is to be included in the discussions and his approval is needed prior to the granting of the sabbatical and for the timing of the Sabbatical.
2. Form a Sabbatical Planning Committee. This committee should include the Pastor, lay delegate, board or council chairman, and representatives from the worship/music committee, finance committee, church secretary and any others directly affected by the Pastor's extended absence (e.g.: other church staff members). This Committee should keep the Conference Minister fully apprised of their plans as they develop.

This group would then formulate the plan for the Pastor's Sabbatical by answering these questions:

- How long will the Pastor be on his sabbatical?
- What will be the dates of the Sabbatical?
- How much time do we need to prepare for the Sabbatical?
- Who will speak for the services?
- Who will plan and/or lead worship, if the Pastor currently does it?
- What do we do or whom do we call if there is an emergency?
- Who will handle the routine pastoral care: hospital/shut-in visitation?
- Who will handle funerals or weddings?
- Do we need a central contact person that the congregation can contact with questions?
- Do we have adequate finances to provide for guest speakers?
- Review what the Pastor does that no one knows about: like turning on the heat or air conditioning or making sure the lights are all out and the church is locked, who will handle these 'jobs'?
- Does the pastor's wife have responsibilities that will need to be covered during the sabbatical?
- Do we want any contact with the Pastor and his family during the Sabbatical? And under what circumstances do we let the Pastor know of a crisis within the church or don't we let him know?

- Do we want the Pastor to give an accounting to the Board/Ministry Council at the conclusion of the Sabbatical for what he did, what he learned, etc.?

This Sabbatical Planning Committee will make a report to the full Official Board/Ministry Council for final approval of the Sabbatical and related plans. The Conference Minister is to be informed of all the final plans for the Sabbatical.

3. Informing the Congregation: The Lay Delegate, Chairman of the Board/Council or a member appointed to do so, would inform the congregation during a Sunday morning service(s) of the church leadership's intention to grant a Sabbatical to their Pastor. This should be done at least one month before the Sabbatical is scheduled to begin so that questions and concerns from within the congregation can be addressed in a timely manner.

#### F. Coverage and Costs during Sabbatical

During the time of the Sabbatical, the church will continue to pay the Pastors' full salary, health insurance, all other benefits, and housing expenses as approved by the Local Conference.

Sabbaticals shall not be considered a use of the Pastor's vacation time. But vacation time may be added to the length of time of the Sabbatical, if agreed to by the Conference Minister, the Pastor and the Official Board/Ministry Council at the time the Sabbatical is approved.

If there are costs and/or expenses involved with pulpit supply during the Pastor's Sabbatical, these expenses are the responsibility of the local church.

Costs incurred by the Pastor during his Sabbatical to travel or study, over and above what has been approved in the salary package by the Local Conference are the responsibility of the Pastor. (Since the Pastor will not be doing any of his usual ministry-related activities, there will probably be no travel expenses incurred that are eligible for reimbursement during the length of the Sabbatical.)

#### G. The Pastors' Plans

As the church makes their plans for how to handle the Pastor's absence, the Pastor and his family need to be making plans for what they will do during their Sabbatical. Some plans may be determined by joint discussion with the Board/Council. But in most cases, the Pastor's family will have the freedom to plan and do what they want. Here are some questions for them to think about:

- Will we be at home the whole time or is there someplace we can go and stay for the duration of the Sabbatical?
- Do we want to take any trips during this time?
- What do I want to read or study while on Sabbatical?
- Do I want any time totally alone to reflect and spend time with God without distractions of any kind? Where would I go to do this?
- How will my finances affect my Sabbatical plans?
- How will my children's and my wife's activities/job affect my Sabbatical?
- Do I have a problem of 'letting go' of my church to take the Sabbatical?
- What are my goals for this Sabbatical?

#### H. Reviewing the Sabbatical

After the Sabbatical is concluded, the Pastor and the Planning committee should meet to review the Sabbatical. These questions may get you started on that evaluation:

- What went well?
- What did you learn?
- What surprised you?
- Was the sabbatical long enough or too long?
- What would you do differently?
- What was the congregation's reaction to the sabbatical?
- Was the church strengthen or weaken by it and how?

#### I. Sending the Pastor Off/ Welcoming Him Back!

A Sabbatical/Renewal leave comes as a partnership between the Pastor and his congregation. Leave taking and returning are significant moments for the church and should be appropriately observed.

In the worship service immediately preceding the start of the Sabbatical, the Official Board/ Ministry Council and the congregation should gather around the Pastor and pray for him, his wife and their family, as well as, the church, during this time of leave from his ministerial duties. This should be a time of excitement, encouragement and support as the local church sends their Pastor and family on their Sabbatical.

On the Pastor's return from his Sabbatical, the Official Board/Ministry Council and the congregation need to find ways to say 'Welcome Back'. An acknowledgement of the Pastor's absence and return as well as the changes that have taken place in the congregation should be highlighted.

Congregations that celebrate both the beginning of the Sabbatical as well as their Pastor's return will discover they are richly blessed for their efforts.

#### J. The Unexpected

No matter how much planning is done, you can be assured that something will develop during the Sabbatical that is the unexpected. What do you do? The church can ask themselves:

"What would (pastor's name) do? Hopefully your answer will be: WFIOFO....

WE FIGURED IT OUT FOR OURSELVES! The Church will be amazed and blessed at how God will honor their decision to provide a Sabbatical for their Pastor.

#### K. Further Information on Sabbaticals/Renewal Leave

(some of these materials are available from Jodi Earhart at the E. C. Church Center)

- ✓ Bullock, A. Richard and Richard J. Bruesehoff, *Clergy Renewal* (Washington, D.C. The Alban Institute, 2000)
- ✓ "Sabbatical Leave: Suggestions for Local Churches and Their Pastors", Disciples of Christ Church, 2001.
- ✓ "Why You Should Give Your Pastor a Sabbatical?" Roy Oswald, The Alban Institute, 2001, video.
- ✓ Petersen, Eugene H., "*The Contemplative Pastor*", (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989.)
- ✓ The Alban Institute, Bethesda, MD (1-800-486-1318) or their web site: [www.alban.org](http://www.alban.org)
- ✓ Lay Delegates and Pastors of E. C. Churches that have already provided Sabbaticals:  
Boyertown, PA -- Rev. Kevin Leibensberger  
Bethel, Dixon, IL – Rev. Richard Reigle